

Information flows in organic value chain research – experiences from the project 'Productivity and Growth in Organic Value Chains (ProGrOV)'

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Abstract

In the research and capacity building project ProGrOV 9 PhD and 6 MSc studies - at Makerere University in Uganda, University of Nairobi in Kenya and Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania - are addressing farm level production and market integration. The overall aim of ProGrOV is to strengthen research based knowledge for supporting increased productivity and sustainable growth in organic production and value chains, and building capacity for future development of the OA based value chains. The project has developed a participatory value chains approach that the individual studies are implementing. This provides challenges of balancing the requirements of discipline oriented research with a cross-cutting implementation framework.

The objective of the paper is to illustrate and discuss the development of a value chain research approach and the related challenges for its implementation in PhD and MSc studies.

Introduction

The project 'Productivity and Growth in Organic Value Chains (ProGrOV)' is a combined research, development and capacity building project aiming at strengthening research based knowledge for supporting increased productivity and sustainable growth in organic production and value chains, and building capacity for future development of the OA based value chains in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Research is implemented via 9 PhD and 6 MSc studies with focus on value chains for local high-value markets as well as export chains.

A value-chain approach implemented in a participatory manner is envisioned for ProGrOV. The PhD and MSc students that are undertaking the research are, therefore, having a challenge in thinking participation into their research and framing it in a value-chain perspective this being in addition to the scientific requirements of their studies.

In this paper the value-chains approach developed by the project is explained and its challenge and lessons learned to date discussed.

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Development of a value-chain approach

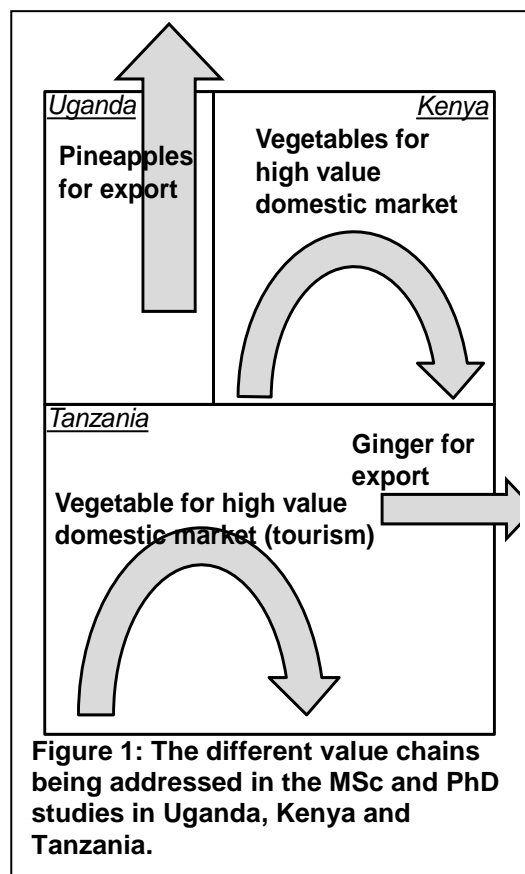
Project concepts and ideas

Overall, the project address the need for an integrated research into - on the one hand - how to organise organic high value chains to improve chain management and livelihood benefits for the farmers and - on the other hand - further develop agro-ecological methods for farming systems intensification based on sustainable natural resource management. The overall hypothesis of the project is that 'Improved organic value chains may serve a dual purpose for:

- developing and demonstrating innovating partnership models for chain based economic and social growth; and at the same time
- improving productivity potential and sustainable natural resource management'.

While some research has focused on improving productivity and Natural Resource Management of smallholder farmers in Eastern Africa this has most often not been linked with studies of how to link improved production to market access and quality demands. NGO's have demonstrated the synergy of supporting ecological intensification through improved marketing and innovation capacity of groups of smallholder farmers but only very few research projects have studied this potential synergy (Pali et al., 2007; Hawkins et al., 2009; Høgh-Jensen et al., 2010).

The 9 PhD and 6 MSc studies are enrolled at at Makerere University in Uganda, University of Nairobi in Kenya and Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania. All studies are interlinked either through the chain being addressed or the produce itself (pineapple, vegetables, livestock), thus the students work with their individual research projects as well as they work in national teams and learn from exchange of knowledge between countries (Figure 1).



The value-chain approach

The project is applying participatory approaches to the degree possible that the individual MSc and PhD research projects can entail. The flow of information within and between the different links in the value chains is an important tool for participation. Therefore, the project is developing a value-chains approach that is based on information feed-back through the chain as illustrated in Figure 2. This research approaches is a further development of general concepts described in the academic literature (Kline and Rosenberg, 1986).

Value-chain research can be said to provide a tool for an interdisciplinary research approach in its own right to help researchers, entrepreneurs, and stakeholders at each step of the value chains, and from multiple disciplines, to identify relevant research questions that can contribute to the whole chain.

Vehicles for information flow are meetings, workshops and the interactions between researchers and stakeholders. While the initial contact and information exchange was related mainly to identification of research questions and immediate feed-back from stakeholders, a continued information flow is being attempted by the project participants in parallel with the experimental work, thereby ensuring that the research is both context-driven and problem focused.

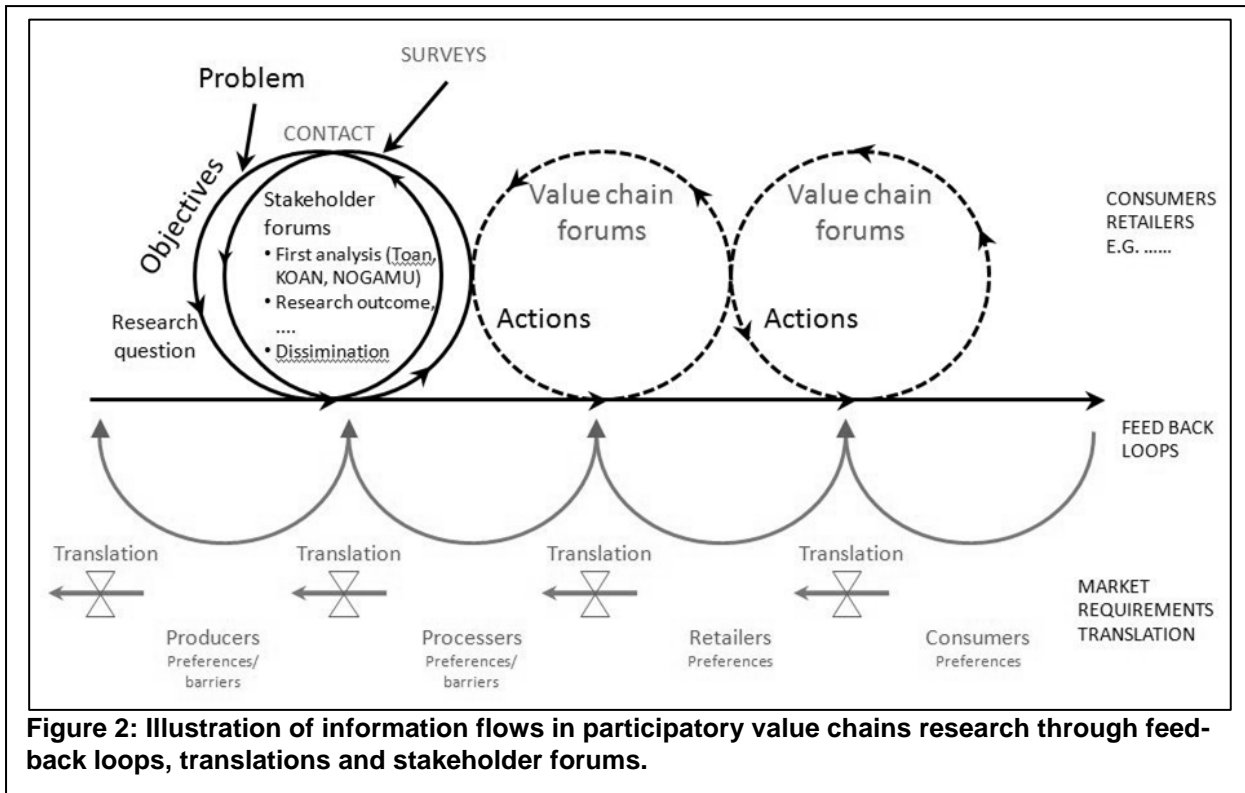


Figure 2: Illustration of information flows in participatory value chains research through feedback loops, translations and stakeholder forums.

Discussion

Taking a participatory approach in MSc and PhD research projects and finding a balance between the academic requirements of the universities, scientific relevance, contextual complexities and the many facets of real-situation problems is a challenge for both students and supervisors. Some of the initial lessons learned are in brief:

- Value-chains based research is a challenge in the discipline oriented university environments as the problems investigated cuts across discipline boundaries.
- The perception of a participatory value-chains approach must be kept in mind through regular reminding exercises - researchers tend to be absorbed by their research questions and may forget to cross-check their temporary findings with stakeholder forums.
- The paradigms that most agricultural research institutions follow are still dominantly the productivity narrative, which makes it difficult to legitimize research that takes value chains aspects as quality attributes, consumer preferences, and chain governance into account.
- Academia has a long tradition for ways to merit research but how to merit research in value-chains development is yet to be established.

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