



SIANI

Swedish International Agricultural Network Initiative



SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION & FOOD SECURITY

Seminar report

Rethinking Agriculture and Land Use - Action Research as means for Change

SIANI/SLU Global seminar, August 24th, 2015 at Ultuna/Uppsala

About this report

This report provides an overview of the seminar on “Rethinking Agriculture and Land Use – Action Research as means for Change” held at SLU, Uppsala on 24 August 2015 with 29 participants. The seminar was a joint effort of SIANI and SLU Global.

Target groups

The primary target groups from this seminar were the civil society in the form of Swedish NGOs and consultants implementing aid projects in developing countries and the authorities funding such projects, but also researchers at Swedish universities working with agricultural development issues.

Seminar rationale and aim

Systemic Practice and Action Research have made a fresh appearance in relation to the renewed focus on food security and land use globally. This has been referred to as the second wave of systems thinking in international agricultural research, which acknowledges farming systems thinking and participatory research of the 1980s as the first wave.

The recent CGIAR reform has led to the establishment of 15 CGIAR Research Programs (CRP) three of which, namely, dry lands, humid tropics and aquatic agricultural systems have an explicit systems focus, as an alternative to conventional, "linear" approaches to commodity-focused agricultural research.

In March 2015 the CRP on Humid Tropics hosted a conference in which the participating social and agricultural scientists stressed ‘the importance of agricultural research to be done with a holistic systems perspective, and for better links between research on improvements in specific commodities and natural resources management’.

The Aquatic Agricultural Systems

program of World Fish has gone further, actualising the above by adopting Participatory Action Research as its approach, emphasising engagement with farmers, fishers, NGOs and government institutions, who are meant to identify the challenges and research priorities together, and involve the potential beneficiaries in the action research process, keeping transformational social change as a greater goal.

So, what is new about this second wave in research for agricultural development? What lessons are being drawn this time from decades of similar research at national and international level under the banner of farming systems? How and where do systems perspective and action research processes come together? Which recent insights from Action Researching will help us rethink agriculture and land use? What challenges do existing institutional arrangements and practices pose in terms of our ability to address complexity and uncertainty? These are some of the questions, which were addressed in the Seminar.



Open discussion

After the lunch break, the presentations led to a two hours open discussion with the participants. The two major discussion items were about the implications of the difference between systematic and systemic and barriers of mainstreaming of action research in existing institutional learning landscape.

First of these items was the **difference between systemic and systematic** interventions including system programs of CGIAR and the relevance of the difference in terms of sustainability of R4D interventions. Prof. Bawden explained that, systematic is like a close circuit. What matters is to follow the guidelines rigorously. Farming systems research was a good example where comprehensive research protocols were created and followed. However, according to Bawden being systemic is different. Being systemic implies more than being systematic. He stated that being

systemic could be inquired by examining three elements: wholeness, interrelatedness, or embeddedness. Prof Lennart Salomonsson also added that acceptance of unpredictability can be an additional fourth. It was mentioned that systemic research is much less common. Although it was implemented by different centres such as Hawkesbury, systemic approach was not taken up by the international R4D intervention landscape like CGIAR.

Regarding research, Prof Lennart Salomonsson mentioned the central role of our worldview for how we look on the concrete world and how we interpret what we see. Lennart continued to mention that we as researchers need cognitive inquiry in order to reflect on what are the cognitive activities that we are using in our research process. Lennart added that we also need epistemic cognitive inquiry to reflect on what are the particular beliefs and value

assumptions that we are holding and how they influence our research.

The second main discussion item was the **challenges in mainstreaming more systemic action research (SAR)**. The first challenge was that the majority of university promotion systems focus on publications exclusively. Early carrier researchers, who intend to implement SAR, although improving in the recent past, have bigger challenges for publishing their scientific products. A second challenge was the availability of mainstreamed monitoring and evaluation tools for R4D interventions with action research approaches. Alex Arévalo, one of the participants in the workshop mentioned that the majority of donors require well-established accountability, monitoring and evaluation tools for a project to be funded in R4D programs.



Workshop session. Photo by M. Cuadra

Summary of the presentations

Reflective notes on the seminar theme from experiences as a researcher working with action research - Dr Cristián Alarcón Ferrari

Ferrari

Dr Cristián Alarcón Ferrari on the first presentation of the seminar, presented a case on the use of action research as a means for change using a land use example in Chile.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) revealed that the resistance of some families for change of their choice of activity on their land depended on the difference between agriculture and forest families in terms of not only employment but also culture and politics.

Action research and Mind Shifts – Rethinking Agriculture. Richard Bawden, Professor Emeritus at the University of Western Sydney, Australia.

The second presentation on Action research and Mind Shifts – Rethinking Agriculture was made by Prof Richard Bawden who presented the concept and historical evolution of systemic thinking.

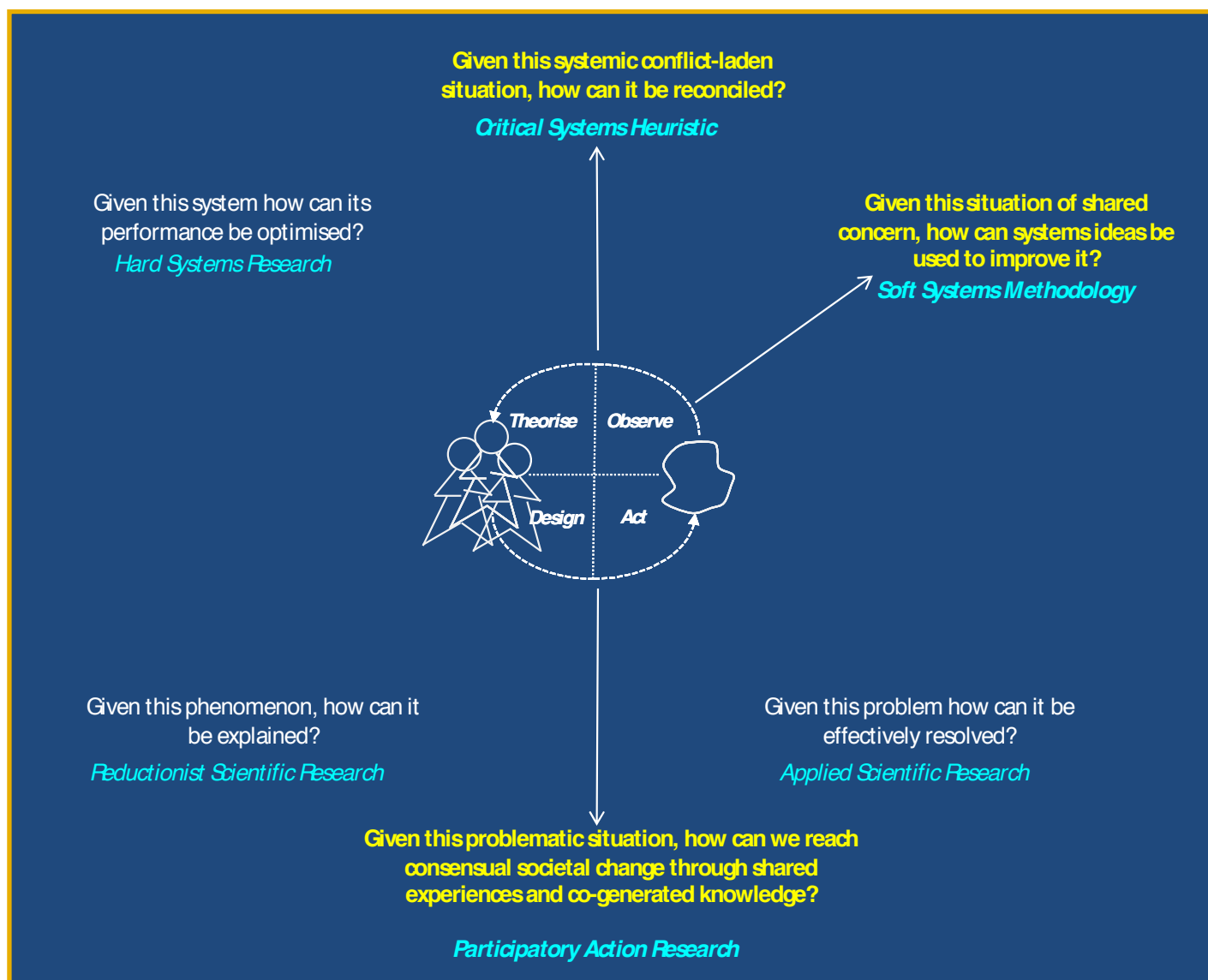
He classified R4D (Research for development) approaches and contrasted systemic thinking with systems thinking and argued that interventions aiming for Sustainable Development need to improve the capacity of the stakeholders to think systemic (see figure on next page).

Prof Bawden's presentation was filmed, please find here the [link to video of this presentation](#).



Land use changes in Chile. Photo by Cristián Alarcón Ferrari

Summary of the presentations (cont)



Mapping of systems approaches to R4D by Richard Bawden (2015)

Challenges of institutionalising Participatory Action Research: Some reflections from evaluating the Aquatic Agricultural Systems research at WorldFish. Professor Nadarajah Sriskandarajah, Dept of Urban and Rural Development, SLU

Lastly, Prof Nadarajah Sriskandarajah presented a recent R4D program of the CGIAR called Aquatic

Agricultural Systems. He underlined the approach of the program and the findings from the evaluation of it for the CGIAR.

Prof Nadarajah Sriskandarajah found that multi-stakeholder approach especially use of NGOs to facilitate the R4D interventions as well as awareness rising attempts among the farmers being a researcher themselves produces very interesting results especially in gender transformation.

Workshop program

Program	Monday August 24 th
09.00-09.15	Arrival and mingle
09.15-10.00	Introduction: <i>Reflective notes on the seminar theme from experiences as a researcher working with action research.</i> Professor Nadarajah Sriskandarajah, Assistant Professor Hans Peter Hansen and Dr Cristián Alarcón Ferrari, Division of Environmental Communication, Dept of Urban and Rural Development, SLU
10.00-11.00	<i>Action research and Mind Shifts – Rethinking Agriculture.</i> Professor Richard Bawden, Professor Emeritus at the University of Western Sydney, Australia.
11.15-12.15	<i>Challenges of institutionalising Participatory Action Research: Some reflections from evaluating the Aquatic Agricultural Systems research at WorldFish.</i> Professor Nadarajah Sriskandarajah, Dept of Urban and Rural Development, SLU
12.15-13.15	Lunch (Restaurang Syltan)
	Afternoon session at Loftets Stora Sal
13.15-14.45	Facilitated discussions in groups around emerging issues and participants' experiences.
14.45-15.15	Coffee
15.15-16.00	Group presentations, Seminar Synthesis by Guest Speakers Close of Seminar



Prof. Richard Bawden and Nadarajah Sriskandarajah during the workshop session. Photo by M.Cuadra

List of seminar participants

Name and affiliation	E-mail address
Organizers and speakers	
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Report prepared by Murat Sartas with comments from Nadarajah Sriskandarajah and Lennart Salomonsson, and layout by Margarita Cuadra. It has been produced through a collaboration between SLU Global and SIANI around the theme "Sustainable Agricultural Production and Food Security". December 2016.

