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METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR MULTI-ACTOR RESEARCH

AT FIRST GLANCE

The multi-actor approach allows an adaptive management of the research based on the actual needs of the practitioners involved and new questions emerging in the course of the process.

Embedding crop diversity and networking for local high quality food systems

Introduction

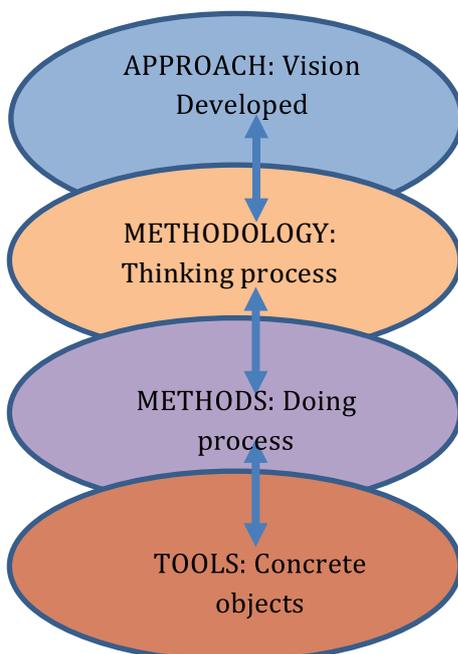
In Diversifood, we used a collaborative process with all project partners to develop a methodological approach for multi-actor research. This process had two important elements. One element was the development of definitions of the words **Approach, Methodology, Methods and Tools**. The second element was an analysis of case studies of 14 partners to define the common aspects of multi-actor research. Both elements were carried out in an iterative process involving all partners in several workshops.

Definitions of approach, methodology, methods tools

We used the following definitions to show how the words **Approach, Methodology, Methods and Tools** are interrelated. Different methodologies, methods and tools may be integrated within a research project

Approach: It explains the vision that shapes the research and the aim that comes out of it, e.g. how the case is handled. For example, it may present the context of organic varieties, and thus the purpose to explore in depth the processes underlying variety enhancement or market valorisation of products derived from the diversified genetic resources.

Methodology: It is the thinking process (resulting from the approach) guiding the generation of new knowledge. It refers to the rationale and the philosophical assumptions that underlie any natural, social or human science study, whether articulated or not. The methodology includes the principles that determine how such sciences are deployed and interpreted. In short, it relates to how the reality is approached and analysed. It guides the focus and intent of the research, it explains the research questions and justifies the adopted methods.





According to the ways approaching reality, it may present the choice to adopt a positivist, constructivist, descriptivist, post-modernist or subjectivist stand, as well as to use quantitative or qualitative data or to adopt participatory processes.

Methods: this term refers to technical procedures applied to conduct the research, (i.e. data collection, data analysis and reporting results reporting), according to the methodological choices.

Tools: They are items used to implement a method, (including software, for analysis and data management, or surveys).

Important key elements

Multi-actor research aims to connect bottom-up with scientific framework. Hence, the research question needs to be developed with and by the local actors involved. The role of the researchers is to help with the improvement of questions such that they are suited to conduct scientific research on. The research cycle can be subdivided in three main phases: 1) developing the research question, 2) conducting investigations and experiments (that can vary in number and complexity) and 3) evaluating the findings and possible refinements or adjustments of the research question. Usually, the cycle is repeated several times to check the outcomes and optimise the result of the investigations/experiments. Another result can be the process of improved collaboration between the actors involved. The more cycles, the more possibilities for improving collaboration and mutual learning, and also discovering new opportunities for collaboration.

Based on the inputs of all Diversifood partners, the following building blocks for multi-actor research were defined: 1) Common will, 2) Common vocabulary, 3) Trust, 4) Transparency, 5) Facilitation, 6) Resources for the experiment and research process, and 7) Adapted distribution of work.

The way forward

It is important to realise that each multi-actor research may have a specific set-up. Depending on actors' shared vision, urgent needs and approaches (embedded in a specific context), a research question will emerge and will inform a research process, integrating suitable methodologies, methods and tools. The dynamics characterising a **multi-actor research process** may change. This can be due to the development of new research questions, changes in group size, unexpected results, and other aspects that can emerge during the process. The capacity to carry out an **adaptive management of research** through a continuous monitoring and a reflexive evaluation of internal dynamics and research results is thus crucial.

Suggested readings

Diversifood booklet 1 "Toolkit to foster multi-actor research on agrobiodiversity" proposes Building blocks to develop multi-actor research projects and examples of community based plant breeding and management of agrobiodiversity from Diversifood experience. Estelle Serpolay, Edwin Nuijten, Adanella Rossi, Véronique Chable, 2018. Toolkit to foster multi-actor research on agrobiodiversity. Diversifood Project. www.diversifood.eu/publications-old/booklets-and-reports

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