Recognizing the importance of reaching a wide range of actors to help them understand the risks of climate change and to advance methods of adaptation, the Rio+ Centre and FANRPAN have initiated a Community of Practice (CoP) for Climate-Smart Agriculture (CSA) in Eastern and Southern Africa.

By providing a virtual platform for dialogue on common issues, a CoP not only has the potential to streamline the practice of CSA into national policy, but can also give those who are most vulnerable to climate risks the opportunity to express their needs, share experiences with others facing similar problems or who may be aware of innovations elsewhere, learn new techniques and critically advocate for change.

To ensure the Community of Practice achieves the desired goals, the participation of smallholder farmers is essential. Often, smallholder farmers lack the resilience and adaptive capacity to successfully deal with the shocks and stresses that climate change can have on their crops and livestock. As a result, lower agricultural yields continue to pose a threat to their food security and the essential role that agriculture plays in farmers’ lives. Connecting them to the right information can conceivably lower the risks affecting their livelihoods and increase their productivity.

A first step toward this goal is enabling participation through email, making it easier for those with low-bandwidth Internet access to participate. Despite predictions that smartphones will outgrow regular cell-phones in sub-Saharan Africa in the next few years, Internet connectivity is still nearly non-existent in rural locations in our target region. Email remains challenging for members of the farming community. This raises the question of how to connect the unconnected, or how to increase public participation through channels other than the Internet.

Despite predictions that smartphones will outgrow regular cell-phones in sub-Saharan Africa in the next few years, Internet connectivity is still nearly non-existent in rural locations in our target region. The increased penetration of regular mobile phone use in rural areas in Southern and Eastern Africa presents such an opportunity. In Zimbabwe for example, over 95% of the population owns a mobile phone, including those living in remote villages sustained by agriculture. Today, many projects are...
already using SMS to provide practical information, such as weather predictions and market prices, to farmers to increase their productivity and resilience. The WeFarm initiative is an especially interesting project that supports direct interaction among farmers all over the globe. Users of WeFarm can ask questions and share farming tips and advice by sending a simple, local SMS (text message). Volunteers translate the questions through an app, if needed.

Besides enabling direct connection to an online forum, other ways to increase learning and stimulate participation through technology include “farmer-to-farmer videos.” In the Africa Rice Project, such videos were shown on a large scale, based on the theory that farmers can better explain certain biological processes and farming methods than people not directly working in the field. According to a survey done during the project, the peer-to-peer videos proved far more powerful than conventional training or exchanges in triggering farmers to innovate.

Finally, creative arts are critical in communicating complex processes like climate change and policy advocacy. As part of its advocacy efforts, the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) continues to find innovative ways of disseminating evidence-based messages. It has successfully used Theatre for Policy Advocacy (TPA), for example, to explain the complexity of climate change and create engagement platforms for policy debate among different stakeholders at local, national and regional levels. As a programme which pilots theatre as mode of communication, TPA is rapidly spreading across Southern Africa as a form of participatory theatre that encourages creativity and challenges locals and policymakers to think seriously about challenges and solutions to climate change issues. A TPA performance combines music, dance, real-life presentations of research evidence, with clear key messages and recommendations. The program is followed by dialogue.

In advocating for evidence-based climate change and CSA policies, the TPA script has been generated from CSA policy scoping studies commissioned by FANRPAN as well as other climate change and CSA-related work. TPA is suitable for community, national and regional levels, and demand for it is increasing. A documentary on TPA can be accessed at FANRPAN’s CSA Best Practices & Theatre for Policy Advocacy (TPA).

By maximizing the potential of all communications options, we can continue to create a more inclusive and engaged Community of Practice for Climate-Smart Agriculture for Eastern and Southern Africa (CoP-CSAES). If we help people to advocate for themselves, we can increase resilience against climate change in all agricultural communities. Through the CoP, the TPA group also takes a critical step in building an online presence that can help scale up and support more communities and more countries and thus engage a wider set of stakeholders. Building a stronger coalition in the region would be an asset for future CSA activities.

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The World Centre for Sustainable Development (RIO+ Centre)

One of the most important legacies of the Rio+20 Conference was the launching, during the High-Level Segment of the Conference, of the World Centre for Sustainable Development (RIO+ Centre). Established on June 24th, 2013, the RIO+ Centre works to reaffirm and make actionable the inextricable link between social, economic and environmental policies for the achievement of sustainable development and human well-being.

In creating a permanent, inclusive structure for the CoP, initial discussions started during the FANRPAN High-Level dialogue held from September 29th to October 2nd and continue today. If you are interested in participating, please join in our dialogue on CSA at: https://dgroups.org/fao/csa-africa/join.