On the Relationship between Evidence and RAS Policies

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It is commonly accepted that evidence is relevant to design and implement RAS policies. Nonetheless, what kind of evidence is relevant and how evidence relates to effective and efficient RAS policies still must be discussed and clarified.

In general terms, the relationship between evidence and RAS policies has been understood in two different ways. The most common is the positivistic approach. From this point of view, available evidence (best if quantitative and result of controlled trials or experiments) should lead policymakers to design appropriated RAS policies or to choose among competing policy proposals. In this line of thinking, the relationship between evidence and policy tends to be linear because evidence is perceived as enough to design the correct policy. Additionally, the quality of the evidence is valued in terms of the controlled scientific procedures used to produce it. Thus, within this approach, good scientists using good procedures would be enough to generate effective and efficient RAS policies if sincere political will were available. Within this framework, it will be easy to make responsible for mistakes to lack of political will or, worst, to poor implementations. Thus, who produce that called 'evidence' would remain untouched, which is an easy position.

This traditional approach has many limitations. To put it concisely, evidence is relevant but not enough of a foundation to design and implement appropriated RAS policies. Firstly, evidence is ambiguous. If all the relevant variables have been controlled when looking for evidence, we are not sure if the same results are going to be met in non-controlled environments. It happens all the time with agricultural technologies; they could work very well during research tests but not in the context of real farmer production. Likewise, if not all variables have been controlled and analyzed, results have to be discussed and interpreted by researchers and other relevant stakeholders to clarify their implications. Secondly, evidence is always context-related. This implies that what was relevant, useful, and even a breakthrough in one particular context may not be in a different one. Thus, these two arguments lead to a different way of understanding the relationship between evidence and RAS policies, in this case based in a constructivist epistemology. Here, positivistic scientific evidence will have to interact and negotiate with other kinds of experience and evidence in plural platforms or in social interfaces. When designing, implementing and evaluating RAS policies, stakeholder participation must play a key role because they are the most qualified to say what they need and how they can contribute. Ownership is essential if RAS policies are to affect positive change.

In brief, since evidence is always ambiguous, context-related and dependent on stakeholder participation, RAS policies based in evidence should be part of collective, interactive processes to generate innovative policies. RAS policies should not be adoptions of any scientific result or reproductions of previous policies. Collectively generated evidence, even it is not as 'scientific' as desired, may be more useful to ensure wide stakeholders' commitment/ownership and prove essential to its success.