Training in Integrated Pest Management – No. 6

Learning from ORPESA: A participatory approach for growers and researchers

Mathieu Bayot, Jean-Claude Mouret, Brigitte Nougaredes and Roy Hammond, INRA, France.
Text adapted by Andrew Lewer, CIRAD, France

Members make a field visit in the Camargue. © INRA, France.

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SIXTH FRAMEWORK PROGRAMME

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Background to the ORPESA project

In southern Europe rice is largely cultivated in protected environmental areas, a difficult situation given the significant impact conventional rice growing can have on the environment. Therefore French researchers have been working with rice growers in the Camargue area of southern France to help their conversion to organic production, a challenging task for this crop because of specific technical problems. The ORPESA (Organic Rice Production in Environmentally Sensitive Areas) project has been a success and in this leaflet we examine how this success was achieved.

Within the ORPESA project, researchers from France's National Institute for Agricultural Research (INRA) developed a structured vocational educational training programme to support organic rice conversion and production in environmentally sensitive areas. The method was based on the sharing of technical, practical and theoretical knowledge within a group consisting of rice growers, both organic and conventional, and other stakeholders. Each work session was based on discussions of farmers' own practices with input from experts in the subjects being dealt with. After two years, the satisfactory results achieved have encouraged the team to continue the work using the same approach.

Training method and session structure

Vocational training sessions were developed based on a participatory method, which was chosen to suit both the objectives of the training and the trainees being targeted. The aim of the participatory method is to list technical questions raised by the practitioners and then envisage a panel of solutions which can be applied by them. It is a pragmatic method which does not aim to produce scientific knowledge about organic farming as such, but to encourage the development of technical solutions.

The organisers took into account the fact that farmers' practical knowledge and scientists' theoretical knowledge influence the way they approach technical problems. Therefore the starting point was the questions practioners wanted to address, and from this a plan was constructed to find solutions. The organisers believe that attacking problems in this manner means they can combine the complementarity of each individual's knowledge and then develop the structure of the sessions.

Organisers sought to create a climate of trust, conviviality and free exchange between participants. At the beginning of each session, facilitators reminded participants of the rules concerning the respect for each person's point of view and the confidentiality of each opinion expressed. All the trainees were informed of the session's structure.

Topics were selected by the trainees a month before the start of the training sessions. The training team and the trainees need to have the same information regarding the content and organisation of the sessions so each session was introduced by a detailed presentation of the schedule. Furthermore, participants were given a book containing the schedule and to encourage note taking.

Training techniques

Themes were developed using different approaches to organise debates around a central question. Different training techniques were used to encourage participation and balance the time alloted to each speaker. These included brainstorming, a group technique designed to generate a large number of possible solutions to solve a problem, case studies, in which an in-depth examination can be conducted on a particular topic, and hum groups, a collective brainstorming focused on a particular topic. You can find details of these techniques and others in the Methodology section of ENDURE's IPM Training Guide (the Guide can be downloaded at www.endure-network.eu).

Results

Many participants showed great interest in these types of exchanges, which marked a distinct break with classical presentation methods. They were also satisfied that a good workgroup had been formed. However, they said that rather than being a training programme as such, this approach was more a way of creating an inventory of current knowledge concerning organic farming. Subsequently, they suggested the work should continue using different approaches. Firstly, they expressed the desire to test in the field some of the techniques that had been envisaged during the sessions. This will be done in the next growing season.
Furthermore, they listed topics which could be developed during further training sessions. Besides agronomic questions, they suggested that economic evaluation of some techniques and the legislation regulating organic production should be considered in the future. Members of the workgroup also emphasised their interest in exchanging experiences with overseas rice growers. Finally, some growers suggested the workgroup should expand its horizons, through, for example, the creation of an organic rice growers' syndicate.
At the end of the project, a written document summarising the method used and reviewing the different sessions was produced and sent to those people involved in rice production in the Camargue. The interest in continuing with this approach and setting up a further project as a result of this experience is to be evaluated during the next meeting with the workgroup.

Conclusion

Beyond the development of a training method based on the sharing of experiences, the participatory approach adopted by the ORPESA project led to the setting up of a group of organic rice growers.
Furthermore, the approach adopted by ORPESA meant that the researchers involved were able to broaden their own knowledge about the practices used in organic rice growing.
While this approach does not permit researchers to develop scientific technical references for organic rice production, it does create the possibility of proposing a panel of techniques approved by, and useful for, farmers. Furthermore, this method helps researchers to work in conjunction with rice growers to develop original experimental plans.

Organisers sought to create a climate of trust, conviviality and free exchange. © INRA, France.

In a context where environmental challenges are high on both political and scientific agendas, thereby encouraging the rapid evolution of agricultural practices, and where at the same time farmers and researchers are confronted with a lack of technical references (in this particular case concerning organic rice production), ORPESA's organisers believe that this work method can enable a quick improvement in production techniques. In addition, it is useful for the consideration and design of future experiments and helps improve agronomists' knowledge on the decision indicators used by growers.

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Summary

The aim of the ORPESA (Organic Rice Production in Environmentally Sensitive Areas) project was to develop organic rice production in environmentally sensitive areas. Organisers developed a participative training method which helped rice growers and stakeholders to convert to organic farming and to improve their organic rice production. Different training sessions were organised, with participants sharing their thoughts about the technical problems encountered and identifying possible solutions. At the end of these sessions, a motivated workgroup was formed. Some members even offered to evaluate in fields on their farms the efficacy of some of the techniques discussed during the work sessions. Currently, researchers and members of the group wish to continue to work together beyond the end of the ORPESA project. In order to satisfy this demand, they are now planning to initiate new research and development actions using the same approach.

For further information please contact:

Jean-Claude Mouret (mouret@supagro.inra.fr), UMR Innovation et développement, INRA, Montpellier, France.

About ENDURE

ENDURE is the European Network for the Durable Exploitation of Crop Protection Strategies. ENDURE is a Network of Excellence (NoE) with two key objectives: restructuring European research and development on the use of plant protection products, and establishing ENDURE as a world leader in the development and implementation of sustainable pest control strategies through:

> Building a lasting crop protection research community

> Providing end-users with a broader range of short-term solutions

> Developing a holistic approach to sustainable pest management

> Taking stock of and informing plant protection policy changes.

Eighteen organisations in 10 European countries are committed to ENDURE for four years (2007-2010), with financial support from the European Commission's Sixth Framework Programme, priority 5: Food Quality and Security.

Website and ENDURE Information Centre:

www.endure-network.eu

This publication was funded by EU grant (Project number: 031499), under the Sixth Framework Programme, and is catalogued as ENDURE Training in Integrated Pest Management - Number 6, published in March, 2011.