Mobilizing Local Knowledge in support of Agroecological Intensification
Lessons from practice of the Groundswell consortium AEI2
1. Identify and engage innovative farmers

- In every village, there are farmers that the community recognizes as not just hard working, but innovative, first to test new practices, or new seeds.
- They are known within their communities as the “best farmers”
- ANSD and AMSP both have developed specific methods to seek out, identify and engage such farmers who consistently 1) outperform other farmers due to better practices or innovation  2) exhibit a genuine interest in testing new ideas
- This a key knowledge resource within communities that Groundswell seeks to mobilize in the co-development and testing of innovations
2. Engaging the wider community in identifying priority problems, and diagnosing root causes

- Groundswell engages leaders and family heads, and women in rural communities in identifying priority problems affecting their farming systems.

- A key participatory method is to facilitate community discussions about major “trends” comparing how farming and food security has changed from 20 years ago, to 10 years ago, to the present, and why this changes occur.

- For each of these problems, Groundswell asks communities 1) “what local solutions have you tried? 2) Who? Source? 3) to what extent is it working?

- This approach seeks to make explicit the communities collective knowledge about the problem, and local practices developed in response.

- Groundswell then seeks to either build on, improve local solutions, or suggest new ideas to test after showing respect for local knowledge.
3. Engage farmers (men and women) at the “intra” and “inter” village levels to assess results of on-farm experiments of new practices

- After enabling farmer innovators across many villages to conduct small scale experiments of new practices on their own land (i.e., multiple replications in different conditions), Groundswell convenes sessions first at the community level to present and assess the results.
- As a second step, Groundswell brings delegates from each of the villages in a given commune (or agroecological area) to present and compare the results of the same experiment across all replications in different conditions.
- This process often generates intense and long debate by farmers, and draws on their deep local knowledge about context, to interpret results (why some replications generate much more positive results than others).
- Applying local knowledge in this way generates deeper understanding of what “conditions” need to be in place (soils, time of sowing, labor etc), for an AE innovation to do well, leading to an assessment to “promote” widely or not.
Engaging communities' knowledge of local conditions to assess AEI innovations
4. Massive mobilization of volunteer farmer trainers (men and women) to promote and spread AEI practices

- Once farmer leaders/innovators across many villages in a geographical area with similar agroecological conditions decide that a particular AEI innovation merits promotion/spreading (and not further testing), Groundswell works with villages to recruit volunteer trainers.

- In each village, AMSP and ANSD encourages a village to identify volunteers, at least 3 for each major “neighborhood” within the village, who are trained in the agreed AEI innovations.

- Each of these volunteer trainers are requested to train and support at least 3 to 5 interested neighbors as part of the community “extension” program.

- This approach makes effective use of local knowledge, not just “technical” but social and cultural of the volunteers, in the work of spreading AEI innovations.
5. Across all these processes, ensure that women farmers’ interests, knowledge and capacities are also mobilized.
6. Help farmers/communities identify and assess many local seed varieties that are disappearing
7. Finally, taking agro-ecology innovations to scale must be based on community social and cultural knowledge.

Farmer to farmer: learning and spread of agroecology requires building on local knowledge and capacities of communities to lead and manage their own programs.