

# Telling the Untold Stories of Rural People's Lives: How Anthropological Approaches Make Research More Effective

Lone Badstue walks up and down the rows, dropping maize seeds every three feet or so and swiping dirt over them with her foot. Step, step, swipe, step, step, swipe. Nearby, the other half of the research team, Alejandro Ramírez López, walks alongside Don Leonardo, whose field they are planting today, chatting with him about his maize crop. How do you determine what maize to plant where? How did you select this seed? What other crops have you planted this year?

Don Leonardo is plowing the last few rows of his field. He steers the ox-drawn plow like a rudder as it carves straight lines down the length of the field. The soil is hard-packed after months of uncharacteristically heavy rain in this part of Oaxaca, Mexico. Don Leonardo's daughter Dionisia, dropping beans into the row next to Badstue's, jokes about Badstue's less-than-perfect sowing technique.

Badstue, an anthropologist, spends a lot of time with farmers and their families to understand how their maize production and seed management practices influence the genetic diversity of local maize varieties.

"Of course, they ask me a lot of questions, too, from how to protect their seed against pests, to what farming practices are like in Denmark, my home

country," she says. This same desire for information inspires their experimentation with landraces, which is one reason for the high level of genetic diversity in their maize.

## Coping with change

"Part of my job is to investigate small-scale farmers' strategies for coping with change," Badstue explains. "Maize isn't grown in a vacuum. In these households, maize production informs and is informed by every other activity. We view it as the product of social processes that change as the socioeconomic and cultural context changes." When maize diversity is conserved or lost, that outcome is the result of complex factors and decisions.

To understand how people accommodate their needs, preferences, and values to economic, political, and social change, Badstue uses an "actor-

oriented approach," which acknowledges the individual's power to process experience and determine how to respond to new threats and opportunities. In choosing how to respond, these "social actors" do not passively submit to changes imposed on them from outside. They influence the outcomes of change, in part by making adjustments to their agricultural production methods.

## A wider perspective

Researchers like Badstue try to make the priorities of smallholder farmers and the complex realities of their lives understood at CIMMYT and in the wider development community, so that this knowledge is incorporated into the programs, products, and techniques devised to help them. "This perspective is important if organizations like CIMMYT are truly going to work with people to develop sustainable ways of coping with the overwhelming changes occurring in the agricultural sector," says Badstue.

"People sometimes think this kind of research is too specific and localized to make a difference," she continues. "But if it enables us to work with the people of Oaxaca to conserve the diversity of their traditional maize varieties, we've probably had an impact of global importance."



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