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Learning while working in fragile and conflict contexts

Six years of SPARC showed that the most valuable insights came not from methods alone, but from how people learned together.

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After six years working with SPARC, one lesson stands out most clearly: research only becomes useful when learning is treated not as an activity, but as a way of working. In dryland regions shaped by uncertainty, conflict and political complexity, producing credible evidence is not enough. To stay relevant, teams must question what they think they know, listen across disciplines, adapt in real time, carry insights forward, and share them in ways that influence how others think and act.

This blog focuses on those learning processes: how individuals, teams and the programme as a whole questioned assumptions, adapted in real time and carried insights forward to shape better work in uncertain, conflict-affected contexts.

This is not a theoretical lesson. It comes from real projects, real tensions and real shifts in understanding. And it points to what it takes for work in fragile settings to be both rigorous and genuinely useful.

Rethinking assumptions: where learning begins

SPARC created room to pause and ask the most important question in research: *what are we assuming?* Time and again, those assumptions turned out to be incomplete or misleading.

In fragile states, formal systems and structures are often less powerful than informal structures and authority. While SPARC researchers knew this from the programme's outset, we were still surprised by how frequently it was the case, the variety of ways it manifested in different contexts, and how often research questions and tools needed to be adapted accordingly. For example, teams realised that measuring income and assets alone could not explain households' ability to cope; informal support systems and social ties were equally (sometimes more) important. This changed how data could be interpreted and pushed teams to include indicators that captured relational forms of resilience. Similarly, SPARCs' research questions increasingly focused on questions of legitimacy, power and the social networks that actually drive outcomes.

Another powerful example was from SPARC's work on innovation. Our scoping studies explored opportunities for digital technologies to enable positive change in agro-pastoralists' lives. But early empirical work found that pastoralists were already using freely available social media channels and apps in self-organised knowledge ecosystems that suited their own information needs. Rather than waiting for others to bring solutions to them, pastoralists and farmers were already using what they had to make their own. This was just one of many cases which demolished the assumption that drylands people and livelihoods are stuck in the archaic past – and our research changed focus accordingly.

Credible research requires humility, letting go of the preconceptions and assumptions that we bring to the systems we're studying. This is so much more important and challenging when working in FCAS drylands, which aren't well served by conceptual models and are also changing rapidly.

The lesson:

Learning begins with humility. The moment we question what we think we know and make space for the realities that formal systems and surface data often miss.

Learning together: collaboration as a method

While rethinking assumptions began at the individual level, SPARC showed that deeper shifts happened when people learned *together*.

As in other multi- and transdisciplinary research programmes, researchers from different specialisms often found they were using the same terms to mean quite different things, or conversely were describing the same thing using different terms. In these cases debating definitions was fruitless, but jointly unpacking the underlying assumptions led to clearer shared framings, better working relationships, and more insightful analysis.

At the programme level, in-person Annual Learning Forums and online learning discussions provided crucial opportunities for sharing findings from across interventions and workstreams. For example, discussions on the importance of social networks and trust-based relationships in FCAS drylands drew on evidence from teams researching markets and livelihoods, land and conflict, resilience, and others. Because people had the time and safety to compare across topics and projects, these conversations generated insights which went on to inform and frame key arguments in SPARC's synthesis papers.

For us, these moments showed that collaboration is not about merging findings; it's about creating the conditions where differences produce better questions, deeper interpretation and shared understanding.

The lesson:

Collaboration isn't about agreeing. It's about creating the trust and space for different perspectives to reshape the questions we ask and the meaning we make.

Adapting in action: when learning drives decisions

SPARC worked in places where conditions changed quickly. The programme's short-cycle approach was designed for this reality, but adaptation was only possible when teams used learning as a continuous process to inform decisions.

In Darfur, researchers studying the impact of conflict on trade were surprised by the persistence of markets in far more adverse circumstances than expected. When the team realised their assumptions were wrong, they not only adjusted their data collection regime but also updated their assumptions and developed new lines of questioning. Regular communications between the research group allowed them to learn together almost in real-time, and incorporate that learning into the next phase of work.

Learning and adaptive management was also a guiding principle for the programme as whole. Early on, SPARC's wanted to engage with a Nigerian partner which lacked the kind of formal documentation so often required by international partners. This could have been an obstacle. Instead it became the basis for an adaptive procurement approach which allowed SPARC to [meet donor compliance requirements while making reasonable adjustments more inclusive of local partners](#).

Not all learning in SPARC was immediate. Some of the most meaningful changes were slow, subtle shifts that accumulated over time. Some teams institutionalised learning by building pause points and reflective questions into their regular planning routines, long after the initial study ended.

In every case, adaptation emerged when teams stopped to interrogate their learning and assumptions, and recognised that their initial framing no longer captured what was unfolding. These shifts were only possible because the programme created the room to revise plans midstream. SPARC showed that in volatile environments, reflection is not a luxury—it is the mechanism that keeps research relevant.

The lesson:

Adaptation isn't a detour from rigorous research. It's how rigorous research survives in fast-changing contexts.

When learning sticks: embedding change over time

These gradual shifts were easy to overlook, but they signalled something deeper: learning was no longer a discrete step in the process, but part of how people worked. As teams carried reflective habits, cross-theme insights and revised priorities into new cycles of research, learning became embedded rather than episodic. When learning becomes routine rather than exceptional, it creates the foundations for lasting change.

People began carrying reflective practice and cross-theme dialogue into new projects, even outside SPARC. Over time, themes like gender dynamics, historical memory and informal governance became more central to some teams' work. As these priorities shifted, so did how concepts such as resilience and vulnerability were defined and used in later work. These subtle, portable forms of influence are often the most durable, as ideas spread first within SPARC and then beyond through social networks and practice communities.

Taken together, these examples show that influence is not always about visible outputs or formal uptake. Often, it is about who carries an idea forward, and how they adapt it to the realities of their own context.

The lesson:

The real impact lies in how people take an idea and make it work in their own context.

What should future research and programming do differently?

SPARC's experience offers a clear message for anyone working in fragile agro-pastoral contexts: research is only as strong as the learning practices that underpin it. To design work that remains relevant in uncertain environments, future programmes should consider several shifts.

1. Build learning into the design as a core method

Structured reflection points, cross-disciplinary conversations and space to revisit initial framing should be planned from the start. These moments are where mismatches surface, shared understanding forms and assumptions are challenged before they calcify.

2. Centre local perspectives and informal systems

Across SPARC, the most meaningful insights emerged when teams paid attention to informal governance, social networks and lived experience. Future programming must recognise these systems as legitimate sources of evidence, not peripheral context.

3. Create room for adaptation

Rapid review cycles, flexible tools and donor openness to changing course are essential. Early-stage exploration should be designed to probe, revise and refine, and not simply to confirm predefined hypotheses.

4. Invest in relationships that make learning possible

Trust is not a soft skill. It is what allows teams to engage with discomfort, surface disagreements and generate shared interpretation. Strong relationships between disciplines, between institutions and especially with local actors, are what enable adaptive, relevant research.

5. Treat influence as more than formal uptake

Impact often appears not in citations but in reframed debates, shifting language, new partnerships or how people carry ideas into other spaces. Programmes should track these subtle pathways, recognising that learning travels through people, not just publications or official fora.

Final thoughts

SPARC's most significant contribution was not a single method, tool or finding. It was the demonstration that iterative, relational and reflective learning is what keeps research relevant in fragile agro-pastoral contexts.

When teams questioned their assumptions, learned across disciplines, adapted in real time, embedded new practices and carried insights into new spaces, their work became more credible, more relevant and more influential.

If future programmes want to produce evidence that matters, they must design not only for research, but for learning: learning with humility, learning together, learning in action, learning that lasts, and learning that travels.

This blog forms part of a wider series of SPARC's learnings about how to conduct research more effectively in fragile contexts. Please see our accompanying blogs on: the [need to reframe aid narratives in protracted crises](#); [how to conduct meaningful research in fragile contexts](#); our [three lessons for effective procurement](#) in fragile settings; and the importance of [building strong relationships and trust](#).



Discussion around a poster session at the SPARC, ICPALD and JO conference in Nairobi, October 2025.

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