Learning and Collaboration: DNA for Next-Generation Agricultural Research

Simret Yasabu, International Livestock Research Institute

What is the general context in which the story takes place?

The Africa Research in Sustainable Intensification for the Next Generation (Africa RISING) program is supported by USAID as part of the U.S. government's Feed the Future initiative to transform agriculture in Africa through sustainable intensification. Africa RISING comprised three research-for-development projects in West Africa, East and Southern Africa, and the Ethiopian Highlands.

In the Ethiopian Highlands, the program is creating opportunities for smallholder farm households to move out of hunger and poverty through sustainably intensified crop-livestock-tree farming systems that improve food, nutrition, and income security, particularly for women and children, while conserving or enhancing the natural resource base.

According to official figures, between 80 and 85 percent of the Ethiopian population depends on agriculture for their livelihood. The lead producers in the sector are smallholder farmers, who have been struggling with food and nutrition insecurity and low income. They face challenges in getting the necessary inputs (e.g., seeds, fertilizers, and technical support) and improved agricultural technology, and from lack of knowledge and skills to adopt new technologies. They also lack access to finance, leading to low output, low income, and food and nutrition insecurity.

The program is implemented by many different organizations at different levels, including eight CGIAR centers, as well as local government, universities, research centers, NGOs, and farmers. A strong partnership has been established at different levels — village, district, and national — to guide research-for-development interventions so they address context-specific and demand-driven integrated system research through "innovation platforms" in *woredas* (districts) and *kebeles* (Ethiopia's smallest administrative divisions), and among farmer research groups.

What was the main challenge/opportunity you were addressing with this CLA approach or activity?

Rural livelihoods in the Africa RISING project sites are based on smallholder crop-livestock-tree mixed farming systems. Addressing the complex bio-physical and socioeconomic problems in these farming systems calls for multidimensional and integrated systems interventions that also take into account institutional and social arrangements. To be effective, these integrated interventions require that different research and development partners and farmers engage, collaborate, and deliver "as one." This is a non-negotiable precondition for such complex systems research and interventions to work. It requires that we identify and work on different "DNA" than before.

Some of the results we want to achieve through this DNA are as follows:

- *Minimizing duplication of effort:* Africa RISING involves the government, NGOs, universities, research centers, and farmers in the innovation platform processes and activities to enhance iterative learning processes for better collective actions. Through regular contact and interactions, the partners map their activities and manage to reduce duplication of their efforts.

- *Improving information flow:* People act in a timely manner and appropriately when they have the information they need on time. Through a mix of online, offline, and face-to-face approaches, we encourage and motivate project partners and staff to document, share, exchange, and report on their activities and learning insights. Online information is best suited for national and international partners, while face-to-face meetings, farmer field days, training, and regular innovation platform meetings are the main channel for two-way information flows among actors in *woredas* and *kebeles*.

- *Stimulating joint action:* Through the program, especially for the local innovation platforms, multiple actors who share common goals are coming together with different capacities and resources at strategic, operational, and farmers' research group levels. Beyond our own sites, some of the results and learning are being taken up and scaled to other communities and locations.

- *Promoting ownership:* By engaging different actors in the platforms and other project activities right from the start, we aim to strengthen the sustainability and uptake of the technologies, management practices, and institutional systems the program has introduced.

- *Building trust:* Collaboration, engagement, and learning are key inputs to build trust among the many partners, so that the goals are achieved and interventions become sustainable. We actively ensure that different partners are involved in key stages of the design, planning, and implementation of the research-for-development interventions. We have also formulated clear partnership agreements, and we use participatory events and activities designed for all participants to listen and learn from each other.

- *Ensuring learning:* To avoid the danger that researchers develop and push their specific ideas, we include specific reflection and learning activities at all levels — in the platforms, across, sites, at the country level, with other regions — where individuals are encouraged to critique their results. We experiment with approaches such as "most significant change," designed to explicitly bring to the surface the insights and learning that different participants are obtaining through the program.

Describe the CLA approach or activity employed.

Africa RISING is a research-for-development project; learning and collaboration is in its DNA. To achieve the expected results, the program uses a combination of CLA approaches, including the following:

- Participatory design and implementation of the first phase ("early wins") to learn how to best prepare the longer-term research and all the situational analyses ("learning from before"), and to build on previous participatory projects

- Enhancing learning and collaboration through different communication channels and approaches: a collaborative workspace (wiki), a Yammer social network to share insights and updates, project documentation (stories, photo reports, digital stories, and images), annual learning events, open access knowledge repository, "instant" meeting reporting, and a project website

- Cross-site learning: farmer field days involving innovation platform members, scientists, and farmers from different sites, exchange visits (e.g., CSISA-Africa RISING), and scientist exchange visits

- Monthly partner coordination meetings and monthly program communication meetings, quarterly Program Coordination Team meetings, and semiannual Science Advisory Group meetings, all focused on issues to resolve, learn lessons, and plan to adapt accordingly

One of the most important forms of collaboration and learning has been through the innovation platforms, which bring different people and institutions together to identify challenges and solutions.

In Ethiopia, the program has set up innovation platforms at district and community levels. These work together with a number of commodity-based farmers' research groups or innovation clusters. The main objective of establishing these learning platforms is to bring different stakeholders together to assess the collective challenges they face, envision a future, learn from one another, and collaborate on common problems or opportunities. Most importantly for Africa RISING, they help participants deal with a complex development approach — crop-livestock-tree systems integration — that requires the collaboration and participation of different actors. Before the innovation platforms were established, key stakeholder meetings and consultation were conducted to identify the ideal members. This innovation platform approach was employed by looking at successes from previous projects, such as the Nile Basin Development Challenge.

Innovation platform members include government, NGOs, universities, farmers, and research centers. The platforms are vehicles to make sure all of our research agendas and on-farm interventions get buy-in from major implementation and development partners, particularly the local government and farmers. Through the platforms, we ensure that government priorities and farmers' problems are well addressed (and jointly addressed) and that interventions complement existing systems and approaches. In this regard, our key partners have important opportunities to build their research capacity and help shape research agendas and priorities based on their local context and needs.

Were there any special considerations during implementation (e.g., necessary resources or enabling factors)?

Some of the success factors in this work include the following:

- Having experimented with these approaches before, we had a strong set of lessons to build on.
- Many of the researchers, and some of our partners, were open to trying these ways of working; they saw the potential of CLA and were willing to actively support and participate.
- We had a dedicated communications and knowledge management team with a range of expertise we could draw on.
- USAID staff associated with the project were very supportive from the beginning.
- The work of the CGIAR centers is being financed through joint research protocols that "forces" collaboration and discourages "lone ranger" behavior.
- Participation is at the heart of the program's design, so there are many entry points for learning and collaboration, and the resources (e.g., for innovation platform facilitation) were built into the program design, rather than added after the fact.

What have been the outcomes, results, or impacts of the activity or approach to date?

The different CLA approaches and activities are helping make implementation more effective. We have collected case stories in a variety of ways, and we are able to witness a variety of outcomes/results and impacts, including the following:

- Unprecedented collaboration among a group of international, national, and local institutions: jointly developing and implementing research, combining multidisciplinary expertise, and crossing institutional boundaries.

- Massive buy-in to the platforms and farmers' research groups at the local level, with farmers competing to contribute and peer-reviewing each others' efforts and contributions.

- Partners are using the collaboration and engagement platforms to bring their agendas and investments and take up the ideas and insights elsewhere, at scale. By providing the means to collaborate and set agendas, the platforms are becoming springboards for action and development outcomes.

- The combination of communications, collaboration, learning, and engagement are themselves becoming a body of knowledge and practice that different organizations are building on and adapting on other projects and initiatives.

- Involvement of local partners from the beginning helps speed the adoption of technology. For instance, in Endamehoni, government extension staff members participated in planning and implementation of program activities. As a result, they are now trying to scale up feed-trough technologies to five *kebeles* administrations (each comprising 800–1,800 households): "Africa RISING is closely working with partners not only at local level but also at regional level. The Tigray Regional Agricultural Bureau uses the Endamehoni Africa RISING site as a benchmark site … for high crop yield of the project's major crops such as wheat, faba bean and potato."

What were the most important lessons learned?

- Collaboration and learning needs to start from the beginning of the program and be part of its "DNA." It is not something to add at the end, nor is it just "communications" and awareness.

- These activities need dedicated people, expertise, and resources, as well as openness to the important benefits from these often process-rich activities.

- Getting CLA right builds a stronger program, reinforcing the human and institutional relationships and values needed for complex, multi-actor research-for-development projects (which have become the norm). They are part of the "software" a project needs; they can directly influence the design, focus, and emphasis of a project.

- CLA approaches are not just for the implementers and core partners; they help bring in all sorts of partners and even beneficiaries.

- Good CLA builds and extends the capacities of researchers and other program participants with new mindsets, skills and insights.

- For research-for-development projects like Africa RISING, CLA approaches help ensure that research findings get buy-in from implementers, because they feel they were part of the process of identifying problems and solutions.

- Such approaches promote ownership and will help institutionalize project outcomes and results after Africa RISING project funding ends.

- These approaches also help promote the inclusion of neglected groups in society, such as women, youth, and people living with disabilities.

- Bringing together different actors led to the identification of new research ideas and agendas; the research was more demand-driven. A good examples is "Enset research," which was not part of the original research agenda; however, research on Enset bacterial wilt emerged as one of the most important researchable issues in one research sites in Ethiopia.

Any other critical information you'd like to share?

Africa RISING implementation strategies can be good lessons for new programs. Using a combination of collaboration, learning, and adaptation approaches is helpful in a complex program such as this one, which needs the involvement of a wide range of partners. Having appropriate human and financial resources also helps facilitate the success of such a program. For instance, having coordinators and assistant coordinators at the site level increased strong partnership among the various implementing partners, which has helped integration of research activities.

Links to Africa RISING online resources:

- Africa RISING website: http://africa-rising.net/
- Africa RISING wiki: http://africa-rising.wikispaces.com/Home
- Africa RISING documents repository: http://hdl.handle.net/10568/16498