

Perspectives on Partnership: Highlights of a Literature Review¹

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Abstract

Working in partnership has become central in efforts to address complex environmental, socio-economic, and technological problems. The terms partner or partnership appear more than 100 times in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and more than 200 times in the version of the CGIAR's new Strategy and Results Framework presented at the recent Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development. It is promoted as an effective means to mobilise the resources and capacities needed to generate knowledge, stimulate innovation and influence decision-making. Nevertheless, partnering is often experienced as time-consuming and frustrating, and it has proved difficult to demonstrate its 'value added'. To improve partnering at the International Potato Center (CIP), we reviewed publications, evaluations and reports dealing with partnership. Rather than a single 'partnership literature' we found several different literatures that approach the subject from different perspectives. Several themes – relating to partnering processes vs. partnership structures, partnership dynamics, types of partnership, incentives for partnering, the key role of trust, power and equity issues, success factors and evaluation – cut across the distinct literatures. This ILAC Brief presents findings in each of these areas, notes some prominent knowledge gaps and identifies areas for future study.

Introduction

In the international development community, 'partnership' is currently the preferred, fashionable, term used to describe a host of different ways in which organisations work together. Working in partnership is increasingly common both for research organisations and for those engaged in rural development activities. Partnership strategies figure prominently in the recent International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) (www.agassessment.org) and in the reform processes underway in the global agricultural research system, which includes the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) (www.cgiar.org; www.egfar.org/egfar).

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Partnership is viewed as central to the interactive learning processes that promote agricultural innovation. It has become a central *modus operandi* in agricultural research for development, where different skill sets and approaches need to be combined to achieve significant results.

Over the past two decades, the number of partnerships the CGIAR centres have engaged in has expanded sharply and broadened from links among research centres to more extensive networks involving the public sector, non-governmental organisations, producer groups and private firms. This evolution reflects changing views on

the role of international agricultural research centres vis-à-vis others engaged in research and development, broadening research goals and the increasing demands of donors and others for visible, short-term returns on their investments.

Approaches to partnership and to their evaluation have often been *ad hoc* and partial – reflecting the short-term interests of specific partners. This makes it difficult for researchers, managers and policy makers to assess the performance of partnerships and to plan and implement ones that respond to the particular needs.

This ILAC Brief presents highlights of a wide-ranging review of literature on partnership in diverse sectors carried out by CIP to help clarify and systematise key issues. The review is part of a broader effort to improve the centre's use of partnership. The Brief summarises major themes, issues and insights that cut across the different literatures. It identifies gaps in knowledge that emerge from the review and high-potential areas for future study. Detailed results of the review are reported in Horton, Prain and Thiele (2009).

Partnership literatures

Knowledge about partnership has been generated and codified in many different ways in different sectors and contexts for different purposes and audiences. There is no single 'partnership literature'. Many distinct literatures deal with partnership from the perspective of particular disciplines and fields of practice. The academic roots and work experiences of the authors influence their perspectives on partnership and the issues they focus on.

Writings on partnership include *analytical studies* that explore how partnerships are set up and operate, as

¹ This ILAC Brief presents highlights of an extensive literature review authored by Douglas Horton, Gordon Prain and Graham Thiele. 2009. Perspectives on Partnership: a Literature Review. International Potato Center (CIP), Lima, Peru. Social Sciences Working Paper No. 2009-3 (www.cipotato.org/publications/publication.asp?cod=005251).

well as *normative guidelines* that promote partnerships or indicate how they should function. There has been little communication between those doing research and those producing guidelines; few guidelines draw on previous research and few studies offer practical guidelines for action. The Partnering Initiative (<http://thepartneringinitiative.org>), which does applied research and also produces guidelines, is exceptional in this regard.

Partnership is defined in many different ways, leading to frequent confusion.²

Authors working in different fields define partnership in different ways. In the international community, partnership refers to a relationship that has more in common with an *alliance* in the private sector than with a business partnership, in which the owner-partners share in the profits or losses of the business.

We offer the following definition for use in the context of agricultural research for development:

Partnership is a sustained multi-organisational relationship with mutually agreed objectives and an exchange or sharing of resources or knowledge for the purpose of generating research outputs (new knowledge or technology) or fostering innovation (use of new ideas or technology) for practical ends.

Our review covers four main literatures, which deal with partnership in different ways.

Research studies

The research literature is the largest body of knowledge reviewed, and offers most insights into the potential roles of partnership in agricultural research for development. The research literature is itself highly diverse, with studies in several specialised fields such as the following:

- Management and organisational development studies
- Public policy and public management studies
- Studies of North–South partnerships in international development
- Science and technology policy studies
- Studies of knowledge–action linkages
- Studies of public–private partnerships in agricultural research

Research studies tend to employ the concepts and methods of their authors' home disciplines and focus on issues currently in vogue in these disciplines.

One particularly rich source of insights is the field of *management and organisational development*, which identifies both the potential benefits and the problematic aspects of collaboration. Management and organisational development studies emphasise the roles of partnership in strategic management, learning, innovation and political influence. They identify issues of managing multi-organisational collaboration and show how collaboration frequently gives rise to new ways of working that may, in some cases, evolve into new institutions.

The public management and policy literature examines how alliances of public- and private-sector actors can improve public service delivery and contribute to the achievement of social goals. This literature considers the interrelated issues of partnership, governance and accountability. Working in partnership can improve

² Sidebars throughout this Brief summarize points made in the publications or reports reviewed. For sources, see Horton, Prain & Thiele (2009).

accountability to the individual partners involved. However, it can also complicate accountability, because of the diverse, sometimes conflicting, interests and accountability requirements of the different partners. This can lead to what has been referred to as the 'multiple accountabilities disorder'.

Asymmetry between partners in access to resources and influence has been a problem in many North–South partnerships.

Both donors and advanced research and academic institutions engage in *North–South partnership* to support innovation and capacity development in the South. Studies of North–South partnerships highlight issues of power and accountability. CGIAR partnerships with national programmes share many common features with North–South partnerships.

Science and technology policy studies emphasise the importance of interactions among researchers, policy makers, and economic actors in fostering innovation, in the context of innovation systems. The institutions that promote such interactions are frequently viewed as partnerships.

Studies of knowledge–action linkages have evolved from a focus on engaging researchers and farmers in participatory research and technology development (in the 1970s and 1980s) towards a focus on building durable alliances among organisations with complementary mandates. Authors in the field of sustainability science explore the roles of 'boundary organisations' in linking knowledge generation and use.

There is a substantial and growing literature on *public–private partnerships*, which includes numerous studies by agricultural economists of partnerships in agricultural research. Issues of market failure, transactions costs and intellectual property rights figure prominently in this literature. One important finding is that CGIAR centres usually partner with private enterprises not to carry out joint processes of technological innovation, but to acquire knowledge from the private sector or to commercialise research outputs.

Professional evaluation literature

Applied researchers and evaluators have published frameworks and methods for evaluating partnerships in evaluation journals and on the Internet. However, few of these appear to have been thoroughly tested and applied in partnership evaluations, and none appears to have been mainstreamed in evaluation practice. Most of the practical toolkits for (self-) assessment of partnerships focus on partnering processes, rather than results, and evaluations of results generally focus on a single partner's objectives. Very few partnerships have been systematically evaluated from the more holistic perspective of their contributions to social, economic or environmental goals.

Practitioner-oriented literature reviews, guidelines and assessment tools

Several organisations that promote partnering have issued guidelines for assessing and improving partnerships. Most of these are intended for use in specific areas, such as public health, transportation or water and sanitation. There have been few studies of the use and value of the available guidelines and assessment tools. Some authoritative researchers encourage the use of 'off the shelf' assessment tools only in combination with more in-depth organisational assessment methods.

CGIAR-related reviews, evaluations, and policy documents.

Various forms of collaboration have featured prominently in the research and development strategies of the CGIAR for many years. So, it is not surprising that many reviews of partnership-related literature and work have been done in the CGIAR over the years. Unfortunately, few of these have been formally published and some appear to be ignored in subsequent work. Few policy documents in the CGIAR refer explicitly to partnership, but this topic is receiving considerable attention in the on-going CGIAR reform process (CGIAR Working Group 2, 2008).

Surprisingly few CGIAR policy documents deal with partnership.

Cross-cutting themes and issues

The literatures reviewed all grapple in one way or another with conceptual, methodological and ethical concerns associated with partnership. In this section, we discuss eight sets of issues related to the purpose, establishment, operation and performance of partnerships.

Partnering vs. partnership

Most of the studies, reports and evaluations reviewed focus on issues of *partnerships* as organisational structures, with defined objectives, resources and accountabilities. Others, however, emphasise the process of *partnering*, or *working in partnership* as a behaviour. The first group of studies emphasises issues of organisational structure, clarity of (mutual) goals, management procedures and costs and benefits. The second group emphasises issues of values, mutual respect and reciprocity, organisational culture, leadership style and incentives.

Incentives and other drivers for partnering

Guidelines for successful partnerships often emphasise the importance of establishing clear, shared goals and of sharing in the benefits produced by the partnership. However, studies of real-world partnerships often find that different partners have strikingly different reasons for participating in the partnership and draw different benefits from it. For example, a CGIAR centre may partner to expand its reach in a particular region while national organisations may partner with the centre to gain access to knowledge or other resources needed for day-to-day operations. Different partners may have different goals as long as the benefits each one derives from the partnership exceed what they could achieve working alone. Other common drivers for partnering include external pressures from donors and the need to 'translate' or 'link' between research results and development outcomes in order to reach high-level goals.

Research institutes often partner with development organisations to promote the use of research products.

Partnership dynamics

Partnerships are dynamic. At one point a partnership may be a loose network; at another point it may be a highly structured operation. There is a tendency for partnerships to evolve from less formal to more formal arrangements, but not all partnerships do so. Some meet relatively stable needs in stable environments with a single type of structure. Others dissolve after a short time, after they achieve their initial objective (or fail to do so!). Surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the drivers of partnerships – the key forces that influence their formation and evolution. External pressures are often important in the formation of partnerships,

especially in the non-profit sector. But partnerships can also emerge from needs and incentives within the partnering organisations. For example, the desire to link research to action is an important incentive for many research organisations to form partnerships with NGOs or other development-oriented organisations.

Types of partnership

The studies and reports reviewed present many different partnership typologies. An especially useful one for research partnerships is built on two main variables: (1) the partners involved and (2) the organisational structure. In the context of international agricultural research for development, early partnerships, which focused on research per se, generally involved only researchers and their organisations; more recently, as the emphasis has shifted toward research for development, a broader array of partners has been involved, including NGOs, farmers' organisations and a range of agricultural service providers. Organisational structures also vary greatly, ranging from informal ones (which serve, for example, to foster the exchange of knowledge or other resources) to highly structured, long-term agreements for research or capacity strengthening.

In public–private partnerships, informal arrangements are often more effective than formal ones.

Success factors: no single recipe

Many lists of success factors are available, including, for example:

- A common, shared vision and purpose and realistically defined goals
- Support for the partnership from participating organisations
- Equitable sharing of resources, responsibilities, and benefits
- Transparent governance and decision-making
- Creation of genuine respect and trust between the partners
- Pursuit and achievement of higher level outcomes beyond the partnership itself

The Partnering Initiative has found issues of equity, transparency and benefit sharing crucial to effective partnering.

However, authoritative authors argue that inter-organisational relations depend so much on local context that there is no set of universally applicable success factors.

Key role of trust

The concept of trust figures prominently in lists of partnership principles and key success factors – the 'glue' that binds relationships. Trust may not be present at the beginning, but needs to be cultivated over time. If trust cannot be established or is lost the partnership is unlikely to be sustainable.

Power and equity: the 'elephant in the room'

The role of power in partnerships is often ignored, hidden or dealt with indirectly. A major equity issue concerns the sharing of benefits, gains or profits of partnership. Power and equity issues are especially problematic in North–South partnerships, where the northern partner controls the lion's share of the resources and decision making. Partnerships between local organisations and CGIAR centres have much in common with North–South partnerships. 'Empowering' local partners is a common objective, but empowerment is usually vaguely defined and rarely evaluated. If trust is the 'glue' of partnerships, unacknowledged power imbalances can often be the corrosive element breaking them apart.

Need to improve evaluation

A common thread running through many of the documents reviewed is the need to improve the evaluation of partnerships, both for accountability and as a tool for learning and improvement. Although it is widely assumed that partnership is an effective way to address sustainable development goals, there is little systematic evidence to support this claim. Improved evaluation is needed:

- To provide evidence of the value of partnering
- To identify the factors which influence the performance of different types of partnership under different conditions
- To draw lessons that practitioners can use to improve their partnership work

Participants have little incentive for comprehensive evaluation of partnerships.

Knowledge gaps

There are very few empirical studies and systematic evaluations of partnership. This is particularly the case in international agricultural research for development. Most research on partnership is based on secondary data, questionnaire surveys or personal impressions. There are few detailed and theoretically grounded case studies. The limited empirical research on partnership in other sectors suggests the value of applying case-study methods to the study of complex and dynamic partnership arrangements. Better understanding of partnership structures and dynamics could assist organisations to formulate and implement partnership strategies.

Much of the existing knowledge on partnerships is tacit – in the minds of partnership practitioners – and much of the rest is in the form of unpublished reports and evaluations. This inhibits efficient knowledge accumulation, dissemination, and utilisation. Knowledge of partnership processes and outcomes urgently needs to be converted into explicit knowledge that is easily accessible in quality-assured form, in peer-reviewed international journals. High-priority areas for the evaluation of partnerships include evaluation of partnering processes, evaluation of the contribution of partnerships to the (often distinct) objectives of individual partners and more comprehensive evaluation of the 'value added' or contributions of partnerships to sustainable development goals.

At the level of individual partnerships, while most studies have targeted this level, there is little systematic information on the types of partnership that operate in the sphere of agricultural research for development, the costs and benefits of the different types and the factors that influence the performance of different types of partnership in different contexts.

At the organisational level, there is also little information on

the types of partnership operating at different system levels and extremely limited information on the policies and management practices that guide partnership establishment and operation and the results of such policies and practices.

Knowledge gaps and priorities for future study are greatest at the level of the research or innovation domain, where very few studies have been conducted to date. There is much to be done to understand and develop partnerships in a particular research-for-development domain. It would be useful to develop maps of 'research partnerships' and 'innovation networks' that illustrate inter-organisational relations that together support the production and application of new knowledge for different commodities (the cassava, rice, coarse grains sectors, etc) or for key subject-matter areas (integrated pest management, market chain development, crop genetic conservation, etc). Better mapping of inter-organisational relationships among all the partners in a domain could help to promote synergies and avoid needless duplication.

Conclusions

We live in an increasingly complex and connected world, where sharing skills, knowledge, resources and perspectives is the norm. Increasingly, we work across organisational boundaries in partnerships, alliances and similar relationships. But we still have, and apply, little systematic knowledge in the design and management of collaborative arrangements. We hope that, by pulling together knowledge and clarifying concepts related to partnership, this Brief will contribute to the ongoing discussions about restructuring international agricultural research and improving the use of partnership in agricultural research for development.

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