

Highlights

CIAT in Africa

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The Highlights series summarises research results and policy implications from the work of CIAT and its partners in Africa

A learning alliance for agro-enterprise development

Whilst there are many successful research and development activities across Africa, all too often exciting applications of technology and social change are confined to small pockets of success that are seemingly inaccessible to others. To address this situation, researchers from CIAT's Rural Agro-enterprise Project (RAeD) and development partners from the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) developed an approach to mutual co-innovation called the "learning alliance". The learning alliance in East Africa involved nine CRS country teams from Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda and was conducted from March 2003 to October 2004.

What is a Learning Alliance?

A learning alliance is a model of mutual participatory learning between research and development (R&D) institutions and rural communities. The alliance aims to accelerate institutional change, improve knowledge management and deepen the level of impact with rural communities. This iterative process involves series of "learning spaces", typically over a 12-18 month timeframe with the following steps:

- Identifying a common goal.
- Learning with direction from best practice guides.
- Putting into practice what has been learned.
- Reflection and feedback on what has worked well and what has not worked well.
- A further cycle of learning, practice, reflection and feedback, etc.

This approach differs substantially from the common practice of attempting to 'train' development practitioners in new methods in "one-off" training courses of short duration.

Principles of a learning alliance

Clear objectives

Objectives need to be developed from the outset of the process; these are based on the needs, capacities and interests of the participating organisations and client groups.

A robust process

CIAT is using the learning alliance to introduce good practices that will enable service providers to shift towards a market-led perspective in their agricultural



RAeD has developed and tested a series of best practice guides¹ one for each step of the agro-enterprise process over the past 10 years with partners in Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Impact of a learning alliance : case of Kenya

In Kenya, the agro-enterprise approach was applied by 49 farmer groups who invested in a range of market options.

Territory	Target population (no. of households)	Products	PMGs	Members	Volume sold (mts)	Value (in US\$)
Mbeere	5,000	greengrams, blackgrams, cowpeas, chickpeas, coriander	9	447	32	13,103
Homabay	5,000	groundnuts, sweet potato cassava, chickpeas, sunflower oil, fish & horticulture	27	3,014	145	78,175
Kitu	4,000	greengrams cotton (not sold yet)	8	381	161	46,153
Tana River	4,125	greengrams, cowpeas, groundnuts, kales & tomatoes	5	4,000	3.5	3,222
Totals	18,125		49	7,842		140,653

Shared responsibilities and costs

This approach seeks to benefit all participants; therefore responsibilities and costs should be shared-this is an important principle to establish at the beginning of the process.

Flexible learning mechanisms

Learning alliances involve a variety of participants from different backgrounds-their interest in participating in different parts of the learning process needs to be ascertained.

Long-term relationship

The duration of an agro-enterprise learning alliance is about 18 months; this is required to effect meaningful institutional change and to observe positive trends at the community level. Trust, generated through effective communication between researchers, development practitioners donors and farmers is the glue to these relationships.

Performance & accountability

Due to the investment in time and funds, performance evaluation of the facilitators and implementers is essential. Poor performance needs to be addressed and partners must ensure that agreed tasks are achieved.

Is there demand for learning alliance approaches?

The rapidly changing socio-political environment means that development agencies are increasingly being asked to empower rural communities to engage in the marketplace more effectively. To do this, development agencies need to adopt new skills and methods to evaluate markets and to develop new business opportunities. In most cases, R&D agencies are neither staffed nor have methods to undertake these tasks. The learning alliance is an approach which can provide a means to share knowledge and build capacity within a learning environment that is demand-led, based on practical

experience and is sufficiently flexible to incorporate the needs of diverse actors.

How is this approach being applied in Eastern Africa?

Together, CIAT and CRS applied the first learning alliance in east Africa with nine CRS country programmes. The learning process entailed four 5-day residential courses and in-country monitoring. There were varying degrees of success amongst country teams, based on experience, local situations and resources (see box above for example of impact).

Impact of learning alliance

What has CRS learned ?

Agro-enterprise has become a mainstream approach for CRS agricultural interventions; the shift from an emphasis on production to markets has been achieved in the participating CRS teams. The agro-enterprise approach has enabled CRS to review their work with farmer organisations and how to assist business development services. This includes the need to integrate agro-enterprise and microfinance.

What has CIAT learned?

Feedback was mainly positive, but the approach needs to be faster, more flexible and simpler. Rigorous analysis of the process is planned and new guides have already been developed. The process of institutionalising the agro-enterprise process with CRS is not complete, but there is considerable interest to consolidate the relationship and make it a showcase of mutual learning and change.

Next Steps

The second CIAT – CRS learning alliance started in January 2005. Due to increasing demand, more than 30 countries from Africa, Southern Asia, South East Asia and Latin America have committed their resources to enter the “learning alliance”.



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1. The agro-enterprise guides can be obtained from
www.ciat.cgjar.org/agroempresas/ingles/index.htm