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Multi-stakeholder partnerships to integrate participatory approaches into institutions of Agricultural Research and Development (ARD)

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1. Introduction

Why the increasing attention to multi-stakeholder partnerships in ARD?

Confidence in the effectiveness of the conventional one-way transfer of technology from scientists² to users has diminished over the years. It is increasingly recognised that the complexity of issues involved in improving the livelihoods of poor farmers requires attention not only to agriculture, but to a broader framework ranging from local governance to national policy, including action for change. This requires the knowledge of scientists from different disciplines as well as the knowledge and skills of other actors who can help to bring about change. Therefore, partnerships between scientists and other actors in ARD are being actively sought.

In this paper, after defining our terms, we distinguish different levels of multi-stakeholder partnerships, look briefly at how the papers in this session relate to these levels and then focus on our specific case: PROLINNOVA, an initiative of NGOs to build partnerships in ARD. We examine the experiences in the various countries involved in PROLINNOVA and the differences from and similarities to other initiatives to build ARD partnerships.

Types of multi-stakeholder partnerships in ARD

We use “partnership” to denote an agreement of at least two different entities to work together toward a common goal while sharing responsibilities, risks, costs and benefits. “In a partnership”, as Norman Uphoff (2000) puts it, “the parties have stake in each other’s well-being”. The term “stakeholders” encompasses all people who have an interest in the issue at hand. Multi-stakeholder partnerships are partnerships that involve several different groups of stakeholders, such as GOs, NGOs, research institutes, business groups, consumer groups and farmer groups.

Several papers in this session contribute to the discussion on participation and partnerships (see Box 1). In the case of PROLINNOVA, the aim of the partnership is to institutionalise participatory approaches, in the sense that they are understood, accepted and integrated into the regular programmes and activities of institutions of agricultural research, extension and education.

Multi-stakeholder partners in ARD can be built at several different levels:

- Local, where decision-making and action are done by members of a group, community or set of communities with economic, social or other connections (Uphoff 2000);
- Subdistrict and/or district, where decision-making and action are done out by different types

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² Scientists are understood here as people with a formal education in agricultural research, an education that follows very different principles and traditions than the learning of the farmers with whom the scientists work.

of stakeholder organisations, such as a district platform for joint research and extension involving GOs (district government, Office of Agriculture, local agricultural college etc) and NGOs, including people from community-based organisations;

- Provincial/regional, such as a similar structure below the national level;
- National, where decision-making and action are done by different types of stakeholder organisations within a country, such as a national platform on ARD;
- International, where different types of stakeholder organisations in different countries agree on action of mutual interest. This is the aim of the GFAR (Global Forum on Agricultural Research) with its seven stakeholder groups: farmer organisations, NGOs, private sector, national and international research organisations, so-called “advanced” research institutes (i.e. in developed countries) and donor agencies.

Box 1: Session papers on participation and partnership

The presentations in this session bring examples of participation and partnership at different levels:

- Testing of the wealth-ranking tool involves interaction at community level between scientists and villagers, allowing participation of local people in defining poverty and wealth and ranking households accordingly. The results feed into decision-making at national and international level about policies and projects in ARD and allow better focusing of interventions on poor.
- The ethical, methodological and theoretical reflections on participatory research in natural resource management (NRM) also focuses on the local level, looking more critically at the political dimension of participation, especially in segregated societies.
- The paper on group dynamics in participatory research refers to a group nested within one or more levels of multi-stakeholder partnership: the dynamics and negotiation of agendas, boundaries and authority in an interdisciplinary, intercultural research team involving national and foreign scientists.
- The paper on People-Centred Livestock Development explores how poor livestock-keepers can strengthen their voice in ARD in the face of the “Livestock Revolution” to meet growing global demand for animal products. It seeks to empower livestock-keepers to dialogue with scientists and policymakers. This goes beyond the community level, encouraging livestock-keepers to form associations so that they can exert influence at national and international level.

2. PROLINNOVA: a CSO initiative to build multi-stakeholder partnerships in ARD

The programme called PROLINNOVA (PROMoting Local INNOVATION in ecologically-oriented agriculture and natural resource management) encourages partnerships of multiple stakeholders *primarily at national and provincial/regional level* that are seeking to bring about institutional change in ARD. It uses processes of stakeholder interaction at *local level*, in the field, focusing on local innovations, to stimulate engagement and learning within the institutions concerned. The national partners collaborate in and are supported through an *international* partnership. PROLINNOVA sees ARD in a broad sense, including the management of natural resources needed to sustain the livelihood systems of farming communities.

Aims and structure of the programme

The concept of PROLINNOVA emerged out of experiences with approaches to ARD, often pioneered by NGOs, that try to capitalise on the knowledge and creativity of local people and to combine local and external knowledge in joint experimentation. Some examples of such experiences come from the Indigenous Soil and Water Conservation (ISWC) and Promoting Farmer Innovation (PFI) projects in Africa. These approaches recognise what local resource users do in their own development efforts, and build on these initiatives.

PROLINNOVA seeks to scale up these approaches and to integrate them into mainstream institutions of agricultural research, extension and education. The overall objective of PROLINNOVA is *to develop and institutionalise partnerships and methodologies that promote processes of local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and NRM.*

The NGOs that started PROLINNOVA saw that formal ARD was slow in improving the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers because it links poorly with other actors in ARD. Government research and extension usually have to spread their services thinly across a whole country. NGOs work more closely and intensively with local people, but are more limited in geographical coverage. In PROLINNOVA, national, self-selected NGOs facilitate the process of building partnerships between the major stakeholders in ARD (farmers, research, extension, education, NGOs etc). They set up a National Steering Committee (NSC) of like-minded people from relevant organisations in the country. These bring a still larger number of stakeholders together to analyse in-country experiences in recognising local innovation and engaging in participatory ARD. On this basis, national action plans to improve and scale up such activities are drawn up.

The national PROLINNOVA programmes then define international learning, networking and other mechanisms needed to help them achieve their objectives. Thus, the process of planning at international level mirrors the approach taken at national level: partners develop a programme based on self-defined needs and interests. The International Support Team, made up of NGOs and resource centres in the Philippines, Switzerland and the Netherlands, has the roles of capacity building, methodological support, web-based information management, documentation and publishing, international policy dialogue and facilitating mutual learning.

Local innovation as entry point for personal and institutional change

The focus of PROLINNOVA is on local innovation. This is used as an entry point to building local partnerships between holders of different types of knowledge. These interactions, in turn, are used as entry points to stimulating institutional change. The process starts with encouraging people trained in Western science – researchers, extension agents, teachers etc – to identify and document innovations that local people develop on their own initiative and using their own resources, without pressure or direct support from formal ARD. In the process of local innovation, individuals or groups build on and expand the boundaries of their existing knowledge and discover new ways of managing resources: new tools, new techniques, new ways of doing things such as co-managing resources, communicating or organising themselves for marketing.³

When scientists and development workers learn to recognise and appreciate local creativity, they begin to see farmers from a different perspective than in conventional approaches of delivering

³ A difference is made here between indigenous knowledge and local innovation. The former refers to knowledge that grows within a social group, incorporating learning from own experience over generations but also knowledge that was gained at some time from other sources but has been completely internalised in the local ways of thinking and doing. Innovation, on the other hand, reflects the dynamics of creating and applying new knowledge and includes modifying or adapting existent knowledge, be it traditional or externally conceived.

ready-made innovations to farmers. They are stimulated to reflect on the roles of different actors in the innovation process. Identifying local innovation is an important step towards engaging with local people as partners in ARD.

The local partners – the farmers and scientists and/or development workers – then decide how to enhance processes of sharing these good ideas through informal and formal channels. The local innovations also become foci for community groups to examine opportunities, to plan joint experiments to explore the ideas further and to evaluate the results together. This process of Participatory Innovation Development (PID) integrates informal local and formal global (scientific) knowledge. Thus, PID builds on what farmers are already trying to do to solve problems or to grasp opportunities they have identified, in contrast to a scientist-driven research agenda. PID begins on a positive note of accomplishment and firmly establishes the status of farmers as partners of formally-trained scientists in ARD.

The idea is that, by learning about local innovation and local agendas and experiencing the power of bringing local and global knowledge together in PID, partners will be motivated and capacitated to bring about change in the way they work in their own GOs, NGOs and community-level institutions. PROLINNOVA offer platforms at provincial and national level where stakeholders in ARD jointly plan how they will bring about this institutional change – and then actually do it. Box 2 shows some of the activities that lead to, or feed into, this change process.

Box 2: Core common activities in PROLINNOVA Country Programmes

- Creating national and provincial/regional multi-stakeholder platforms to share information about local innovations and to learn jointly about PID and its institutionalisation
- Making inventories of local innovations, innovators and organisations working with them
- Building capacity to identify and document local innovation and engage in PID, through training workshops for farmers and scientists
- Bringing farmers, development workers and formal researchers together to plan and implement participatory experiments, starting from jointly prioritised local innovations
- Participatory monitoring and evaluation of joint activities, outcomes and impacts
- Creating public awareness (through innovator fairs, radio programmes etc) and engaging in policy dialogue with key decision-makers in agricultural research, extension and education, in order to create favourable institutional and policy environments for PID.

3. Country experiences in partnership building

The initial phase in PROLINNOVA involves building multi-stakeholder platforms for this process. Such a “platform” is a space for negotiation created in situations where diverse actors define and struggle for the same set of resources yet depend on one another to realise their objectives (Röling & Jiggins 1998). Within the platform, the actors discuss and clarify their points of view and seek common ground for joint action planning. Platform members are initially not partners, but can become partners.

Each of the nine countries currently involved in PROLINNOVA has a somewhat different history in experiences of participatory approaches and in relations between the major stakeholder groups in ARD. The groups are highly diverse, ranging from small “alternative” NGOs to large and often conservative GOs, with very different cultures and ways of working. Each Country Programme (CP) chooses its own way to deal with the challenge of forging partnerships among such diverse

actors. Differences between the CPs are also due to the staggered starting dates: the CPs in Ethiopia, Ghana and Uganda started in 2003, those in Cambodia, Nepal and South Africa in 2004 and those in Niger, Sudan and Tanzania in 2005.

ARD stakeholder organisations in Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda had previously been involved in projects concerned with farmer innovation in land husbandry (ISWC and PFI) and therefore had documented examples of farmer innovation and participatory research and extension that could be used to inform new potential partners. The government extension services already had some understanding of the approach and were open to collaborate with NGOs to scale it up.

In all the CPs, two layers of coordination were set up: 1) an NSC made up of people from NGOs and high levels of government; and 2) a core team that actually implements the project. The NSC is the decision-making body of PROLINNOVA at country level. It defines the main lines of the programme and its strategy. The core team involves not only the coordinating NGO but also various other agencies. In one country (Nepal), only NGOs are in the core team; in the others, the core team is a smaller version of the national multi-stakeholder platform. In most cases, the organisations collaborating at these two levels have agreed on terms of reference or have signed a semi-formal memorandum of understanding. These agreements allow flexibility and minimise bureaucracy, while reinforcing commitment to the programme and its principles.

Personal interest of key officials in ARD organisations has influenced the forming of partnerships. For example, in Ghana, the Director of Agricultural Extension chairs the NSC; in Uganda, it was the Deputy Director of the National Agricultural Research Organisation.

The different CPs have found ways to deal with the issue of respecting hierarchy, without being trapped by it. In most countries, the strategy is to handpick key allies in GOs to join the core team and to invite higher-level representatives of these and other key organisations to join the NSC. Nepal has included very high-level government officers in the NSC and gives them a legitimising role whereas, in Cambodia, a high-level officer from the Department of Agriculture is in the core team making the day-to-day decisions in the CP. In this case, involving only one (open-minded) high-level official helped to “beat” the bureaucracy. However, bringing in the bureaucracy on a larger scale, such as in Ethiopia, where the relevant organisations chose their own representatives to the NSC, seems to have bogged it down.

Ethiopia, Ghana and Sudan are so diverse in agroecological and cultural terms that the local partners preferred to decentralise activities in several semi-autonomous regional programmes, with a light national structure. In South Africa, the facilitating NGO and like-minded individual partners in other organisations preferred to start in only one province, gain experience and evidence there, and then gradually expand to other provinces. This choice was also made for cost reasons.

Countries that already have a policy of decentralisation, such as Tanzania and Ethiopia, offer favourable conditions for bringing decision-making about local ARD down to the district level and thus fostering the building of multi-stakeholder partnerships there.

Because PROLINNOVA aims to institutionalise participatory approaches, the “target” groups are the institutions involved in ARD. These should also include farmer institutions. At this early stage, the degree of farmer involvement in the programme activities differs greatly. Because the activities in Cambodia are integrated into various projects coordinated by members of the core team, this CP has managed to reach a much greater number of farmers directly, compared to the other CPs thus far. Moreover, Cambodia is the sole country in which farmers take part not only in

workshops but also in the NSC.

4. Other initiatives to build ARD partnerships: differences and similarities

PROLINNOVA is not the only or first initiative to build multi-stakeholder partnerships in ARD. In the early 1990s, the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) brought together primarily national research organisations in developing countries and CGIAR centres in “Ecoregional Programs”. Relations often suffered because of the dominant role played by the centres (Horton *et al* 2002). A decade later, when it became increasingly difficult to obtain funding for research if its contribution to development could not be shown, the CGIAR set up “Challenge Programs” involving both research and development partners. Transaction costs have been high but considered worthwhile because – an important point for the CGIAR – the Challenge Programs have leveraged additional funding for research. Particularly the new Challenge Program that started in 2005 in sub-Saharan Africa sees the development of effective partnerships as key to its success and intends, through research on institutional learning, to provide an International Public Good (IPG) on effective partnership development (Science Council & CGIAR Secretariat 2004).

The GFAR was established by development-cooperation donors in the mid-90s to bring together the perspectives of all major stakeholders in ARD to prioritise research, link it with development and stimulate innovation systems. It encouraged “Global Partnership Programmes” (GPPs) as a strategy to promote multi-stakeholder collaboration in ARD. PROLINNOVA is the first and only initiative by NGOs to build a GPP. The other two GPPs set up thus far were initiated by research and donor agencies, give attention mainly to documentation and exchange through databases and workshops, and have Facilitation Units hosted by research institutes. Both of these GPPs depend heavily on their Facilitation Units to plan activities and generate outputs.

PROLINNOVA, in contrast, encourages the building of numerous decentralised partnerships in different parts of the world. The initiative came from development-oriented NGOs that had identified missing links and motivational factors in ARD. It focuses on approaches, methods and linkages – on improving the way the various actors in ARD communicate and work with each other, with particular attention to including and enhancing the innovative capacities of farmers. The planning is done by people from different stakeholder organisations in each country. The external funds for PROLINNOVA go mainly to national and international activities decided by stakeholders in these countries, in addition to their substantial own contribution.

The multi-stakeholder partnerships are not being sought, like in the CGIAR Challenge Programs, to generate a specific research output but rather to generate personal, institutional and policy change so that participatory ARD can be widely practised. Joint analysis of partnership experiences is primarily intended to improve the process in each country, but could contribute to generating an IPG in the sense of learning about building ARD partnerships and, particularly, understanding the role of NGOs in facilitating these partnerships.

5. ARD partnerships: benefits and constraints

Lessons learnt in building multi-stakeholder partnerships

Common experiences made in all countries that can serve as positive lessons for building future multi-stakeholder partnerships to institutionalise PID are:

- *Respect differences in pace and capacities of partners.* Stakeholder organisations differ in the

speed with which they can take on board new ideas, make decisions and act. These differences should be respected.

- *Clarify roles and responsibilities.* Overlapping of roles and responsibilities can cause confusion or even conflict. These need to be negotiated and spelled out clearly, and a well-defined governance structure should make the decision-making process in the partnership clear to all. However, the need for and speed of formalising the partnership depends on the history of interaction between the stakeholders and the legal context.
- *Avoid unnecessary bureaucracy.* Bureaucracy consumes people's time and energy, and erodes the commitment and enthusiasm of partners. This is one argument for keeping the partnership as informal as possible. Written agreements need to be signed when funds are handled, but these should focus on principles rather than detailed procedures set in stone.
- *Encourage relevant change in roles.* The number, type and roles of partners will and should change over time. Specific organisations or even persons may play an important catalytic role at the initial stages of building the partnerships, but an indicator of success will be if this role changes so that all partners feel responsible for continuing to nurture the interaction.
- *Reward active partners.* Ways have to be found to reward all active members for the time and energy they bring to make the partnership work. This is not necessarily or only in the form of money for carrying out activities under the programme. It can include opportunities to attend training courses or workshops, and access to information, recognition and contacts.
- *Pay attention to good communication.* Good information flow is crucial for partnership. This means more than just sending messages and documents. It involves personal visits to members' offices, joint visits to the field, and involvement of NSC members in training and information-exchange workshops. Attention must also be given to good communication within each partner institution.
- *Provide concrete examples.* Clear evidence of the existence of inspiring local innovations and experiments, e.g. in brochures or posters or innovation catalogues or on field visits, boosts the interest and commitment of current partners and attracts new ones.
- *Build on existing initiatives and networks.* The small amount of funds available for PROLINNOVA has forced CPs to build on existing initiatives, projects and networks. The CPs gain strength from the momentum and resources, at the same time as influencing the concepts and ways of working within the projects and networks.
- *Encourage own contributions.* At the 2005 workshop of CP coordinators in Uganda, they pointed out that the relative shortage of funding and the need for each partner to make own contributions to be able to carry out the jointly planned programmes have helped strengthen the partnerships and show their commitment. External funds are needed for the work of initiating and building the partnerships and institutionalising PID, but a growing preparedness of partners to carry the costs of the PID is evidence of its institutionalisation.
- *A vision beyond projects.* There are many steering committees that oversee implementation of projects and are formed for the sake of them. A partnership has a greater chance for success if the partners can identify with the jointly formulated objectives, link these to their institutional mandate and commit themselves to them irrespective of individual projects.

Dealing with diversity and potential conflict

In building multi-stakeholder platforms, diversity is the starting point – and is necessary for change and transformation. The NGO facilitators of PROLINNOVA cannot look for partners only within their natural constituency. They need to reach out beyond this “circle of friends” and scale

up by interacting with “other-minded” individuals and organisations that are not traditionally partners. Conflict is intrinsic to the process of building multi-stakeholder platforms in which – by definition – each stakeholder retains its own interests or “stakes”.

In each country, the facilitating NGO creates space for potential partners to come together and find common ground. Stakeholders as diverse as GOs, NGOs and farmers will clearly have different perspectives. The process of building and maintaining partnerships must go through numerous phases of contesting theories and “truths”, deconstructing beliefs (e.g. about the abilities and roles of different actors in innovation systems), mediating disputes and negotiating agreements. This is part of the joint learning process.

Dealing with diversity and potential conflict is the fundamental challenge in multi-stakeholder platforms. The PROLINNOVA partners are presently drawing up a code of practice that clarifies partners’ roles and boundaries in joint action. Laying out clearly the responsibilities and benefits of each of the partners can reduce the potential for conflict, but conflict cannot be avoided completely, in view of the fact that PROLINNOVA seeks to bring about institutional change and a shift in the relations of power and influence within ARD.

Benefits of NGO facilitation

In PROLINNOVA, the multi-stakeholder process is facilitated by NGOs. This role brings both opportunities and challenges. At workshops in Ethiopia in 2004 and Uganda in 2005, the CP coordinators identified the following strengths of NGO facilitation:

- Field-based NGOs generally have a good understanding of resource-poor farmers’ situation and have developed good relations with farmers, while quite a few also have linkages with national and international agencies and can therefore play a brokering role.
- To build up partnerships between very different types of institutions, it works well to start by seeking link-minded individuals or small groups that are committed and then together strategise how to influence their organisations. NGOs that are used to networking often know the individuals in other organisations who are open to the ideas and could therefore open the door to institutional change.
- If development-oriented NGOs facilitate the interaction between stakeholders, they can make sure that outsiders’ and farmers’ interests are balanced, especially in negotiations in planning joint experimentation, when scientists often tend to dominate.
- Many NGOs have often been exposed to participatory planning approaches and have skills and experience in facilitating open partnership meetings in which all can contribute equally.
- NGOs are relatively flexible in their way of operating and, as coordinators of a multi-stakeholder CP, can move funds fairly quickly and share reports and documents easily, so that bureaucratic delays do not slow down jointly planned activities and stifle motivation.
- NGOs have made more efforts than GOs to encourage voluntary organisation of rural people to achieve common objectives, such as Farmer Innovator Groups, Farmer Research and Extension Groups, Farmer Field Schools and Farmers’ Fora. These offer a space for farmers with experience in PID to discuss how they want to work with and influence other stakeholder groups, and can be a starting point for their involvement in ARD platforms at higher levels.

Constraints and challenges of NGO facilitation

NGOs facilitating the PROLINNOVA CPs have also encountered some constraints and challenges, including the following:

- In many countries, GOs initially find it difficult to accept an NGO as coordinating organisation, particularly in ARD activities (*cf.* Ejigu & Waters-Bayer 2005).
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships in ARD have major political dimensions, especially if – as in the case of PROLINNOVA – the partnerships are being built explicitly to change perceptions, attitudes, ways of working together, definition of roles and ultimately how ARD resources are used. Political awareness and competencies are needed to manage this process. NGOs often have only a small number of the very capable people with good connections who are needed for this delicate task. The work of facilitating the stakeholder interactions in a CP is therefore often carried by only one committed person within the NGO.
- Poor internal communication in the NGOs makes it difficult to keep and spread knowledge and commitment. In this respect, they are no better than the other stakeholder organisations.
- Most NGOs do not have core funding; their activities are financed on a project basis. In many GOs, payment for staff time is already assured, but other funds are needed for them to be able to do any work. In the case of the NGOs, staff time is allocated to specific externally-funded projects. Most of the “own contribution” of the considerable time needed to coordinate the CP activities is therefore unpaid “free” time.

Looking ahead

The progress in institutionalising participatory ARD is slow, as the process of building multi-stakeholder partnerships to bring this about has been slow. Keeping track of small achievements – and of the difficulties faced – is essential to social learning and institutional change. A key activity is therefore participatory monitoring and evaluation in each CP and in the PROLINNOVA programme as a whole. The biggest challenge has been bringing the research institutes into the partnerships. In this respect, the PROLINNOVA CPs expect to benefit from the increasing pressure being exerted by donors and governments on formal research to show its impact. PROLINNOVA offers researchers in the formal sector an opportunity to do this.

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