Multi-stakeholder partnerships

Policy pointers

- Multi-stakeholder partnerships are important for effective agricultural innovation processes in complex and dynamic environments: partnerships can create synergies and be cost-effective.
- Multi-stakeholder partnerships need to be part of agricultural and food-security policies and programmes in terms of mechanisms, structures and resources.
- Partnership between stakeholders is important to integrate participatory approaches into research and development organisations.
- A solid body of evidence exists on ways to make partnerships work, covering core principles, partnership operation and ways to handle conflicts.
- Agricultural research and development organisations need to create space and commit resources (capacity and structures) to engage in partnership collaboration.

Agricultural development can be accelerated by forging and facilitating multi-stakeholder partnerships

The challenges of feeding the world and ensuring sustainable livelihoods for small-scale farmers remain greater today than ever before. But the past decade has shown that agricultural innovation under increasingly complex conditions—locally, nationally and globally—cannot be done alone by any single key actor. Effective interaction is needed between farmers on the one hand and business, research and development organisations on the other (Woodhill & Van Vught 2008). None of these actors alone has the full insights, competences and resources needed to find answers to the challenges facing agricultural development. Functional links between them can be created at field and project level in participatory or interactive development and research programmes (Rajalakshmi 2009).

Much can be gained if project-focused collaboration is complemented by structured, well-facilitated partnership at the organisational level. These allow organisations to join hands in setting strategic directions and identifying implementabilities at an early stage. Such platforms help build mutual trust and, if they function well, form a powerful alliance to promote the joint agenda.

PROLINNOVA, a network of over 160 organisations in Africa, Asia and Latin America promoting participatory approaches in agricultural research and development (ARD), has eight years of experience in building such partnerships at both national and international level. PROLINNOVA partners have recognised the need to break through institutional boundaries, and have been learning through joint analysis of their experiences in doing this.


Further references


Policy Brief

PROLINNOVA vision:
A world where women and men farmers play decisive roles in ARD for sustainable livelihoods
Benefits and costs of partnership

Working through multi-stakeholder partnerships can bring numerous benefits:

• Partnerships mobilise complementary expertise and resources, including staff, facilities, hardware and funds.
• They provide avenues for improved coordination of work among stakeholders in the same area. This increases effectiveness by reducing confusion and conflict, using partnership-based mechanisms to handle any conflicts that may arise.
• They can make policymakers listen by amplifying the voice of individual organisations.
• Organisations and their staff learn, expand their horizons and access new knowledge – important for organisational strengthening and increasing the relevance of their work.

But “costs” need to be considered, too. The most visible costs are funds. Time and commitment of staff.

The Partnership: the funds, time and commitment of staff.

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Benefits and costs of partnership

Key principles of successful partnerships

There is solid evidence from eight years’ work within Proinnova, as well as in other development and research partnerships (Gonsalves & Niangando 2006, Horton et al 2009) on the main principles to which successful partnerships need to adhere. First and foremost, they should have shared ownership, i.e. partners feel collective responsibility. The design and facilitation of the partnership should enable this. This implies a culture of basic equality among partners in which contributions from partners are valued as much as those from researchers. Ownership will develop only when the common agenda is linked to individual interests, when partners recognise their interests in the partnership agenda, even if only in specific agenda concerns.

A partnership can be functional only with openness and transparency in decision-making. This is especially important with regard to the use of both external and internal resources. Such transparency contributes to breaking down barriers of competition and territoriality. The key to a successful partnership lies in transforming existing competition and “territoriality” between agencies into collaboration.

Partnership design should be based on the open nucleus principle: the partnership must be prepared to change its composition if and when necessary. It may start with a small group, but others should be able to join, and some partners may have to be persuaded to leave if they contribute little. Finally, it is important that the partnership itself is made part of the joint agenda. The need for the partnership and the way it functions should be reviewed jointly and regularly. In this way, the partnership becomes a common area of interest and, if it functions effectively, can be seen as an achievement in itself.

Lessons from practice

• Start with what is already there. In many cases, there are relevant networks or platforms at least partly covering the partnership agenda. Overlap and competition should be avoided, following the principle of subsidiarity. Inception planning should take stock of existing experiences, e.g. through Stakeholder Analysis and/or Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems.

• Capacity building for partnership management. Stakeholders need to understand the rationale for partnership and what is expected of them. Staff of coordinating organisations can follow dedicated courses. Equally important is to include M&E and learning in the partnership-building process by making the partnership approach a regular joint learning item on the agenda and documenting its key milestones.

• Partner (self-)selection. Strong partnerships are built if organisations make a committed decision to join. They may start small, allowing others to show interest to join as, and when, they want. When partners need to be sought, not only like-minded organisations should be invited, but also relevant others who could make an important contribution to the agenda.

• Role definition. Clarity is needed about roles and responsibilities of each partner as well as resource allocations. Overlapping roles can be a source of inefficiency and conflict. Often roles and tasks agreed will need to be formalised in agreements, but to prevent bureaucracy and maintain flexibility of the partnership, care should be taken to formalise only the minimum required.

• Governance. Clarity on governance is essential. What is the structure and process for decision-making within the partnership? Who decides on what? What is the position of the coordinating organisation (which often holds the budget)? The process of forming the governance mechanisms therefore needs careful attention, allowing influence of partners and their constituencies.

• Importance of rapid initial success. A partnership quickly gains momentum if an initial, strategically chosen activity, is successful. “Entry-point activities” ideally involve several partners, yield interesting insights in a relatively short time and lead to tangible outcomes. If, in the process, materials and other resources can be shared, this helps to bond the partnership.

• Effective communication. Communication is a central component of partnership facilitation. It is needed to create openness and transparency and to coordinate implementation of activities. The challenge is to