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Building Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships to Promote Farmer Experimentation and Innovation in Ghana

In the mid-1990s, various organisations concerned with agricultural development in northern Ghana sought ways to promote joint research, extension, advocacy and learning with farmers as equal partners. They were disillusioned with the conventional “agricultural modernisation” and “transfer-of-technology” approach which all of them had tried to implement but with little success. They had recognised the need to build on the indigenous knowledge (IK) and initiatives of smallholder farmers in order to develop LEISA (Low-External-Input and Sustainable Agriculture) technologies and to strengthen farmers’ capacities to interact with formal research and development (R&D). The organisations that formed the Northern Ghana LEISA Working Group (NGLWG) in 1995 were the Association of Church Development Projects (ACDEP), the extension service of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA), the Savanna Agricultural Research Institute (SARI), the Animal Research Institute (ARI) and the University for Development Studies (UDS) in Tamale.

ACDEP — the organisation that facilitated this new institutional arrangement — had been established

in 1977 as a network of church-based projects seeking to promote Participatory Technology Development (PTD) in a process of farmer-led experimentation in collaboration with other stakeholders in agricultural R&D.

The NGLWG has continued to exist for almost ten years and is now a partner in the PROLINNOVA (Promoting Local Innovation) programme in Ghana. This is one of the Country Programmes in the international PROLINNOVA partnership programme initiated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to scale up R&D approaches that enhance local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and natural resource management. The NGLWG is responsible for PROLINNOVA activities in northern

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Ghana. In order to learn from experience and feed the lessons into the process of building partnerships to promote local innovation, the NGLWG critically analysed its own experiences in creating, facilitating and managing a multi-stakeholder partnership.

Creating the partnership

The NGLWG was created as part of an action-research project in collaboration with the Centre for Information on Low External Input and Sustainable Agriculture (ILEIA). Initially, ILEIA was the legal holder for the project, as well as a partner in the research, advocacy and learning process.

Several factors favoured the formation of the NGLWG. The initiators of the collaboration, ILEIA and ACDEP, were bound by a common concern for sustainable agriculture, the environment and the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers producing primarily for subsistence. The local partners (ACDEP, MoFA, SARI, ARI and UDS) felt that their own goals could be achieved only by focusing on the collective goal of increasing productivity in smallholder farming. Collaboration was officially encouraged in the face of dwindling government funding for agricultural R&D. As part of government policy for financial rationalisation, while the operational budgets of many institutions had been severely cut, they were still expected to implement their field programmes. Collaborating with other institutions made better use of existing resources and expertise.

The NGLWG went through a network-building process of developing a collective vision and specific goals for the group, gaining members' commitment, negotiating between different interests (of individuals, institutions and in-groups) and developing its own ethos, norms, working principles and procedures. The members came not only from different institutions but also from different disciplines. Some were oriented more to research, others more to practical development on the ground. The diversity of opinions had to be considered before majority decisions could be taken. Agreements have been mainly verbal, amongst individuals rather than their institutions. The process of agreeing on what to do and how to do it brought the stakeholders closer together.

The ACDEP field stations that facilitated the farmer-led experimentation had already existed for some time and had established good rapport with the local people. The experimenting farmers and their communities, including the chiefs, were very enthusiastic about the collaboration. The fact that farmers' priorities were taken as a starting point for PTD secured their interest and cooperation.

Several national policies had created a situation in which farmers were seeking LEISA-based methods of production for their own survival and for the market. For example, the removal of subsidies on agricultural inputs had increased the price of fertiliser and veterinary drugs far beyond the reach of smallholder farmers. This encouraged experimentation with alternatives based on IK, such as ethno-veterinary treatments and using animal manure to improve soil fertility.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has played an important role in building the partnership through joint learning processes. M&E takes place at different levels:

1. *Reports to donor organisations.* These include reports on NGLWG training workshops and on fieldwork being undertaken.
2. *Community open days.* Farmers selected by the community to experiment on its behalf report back to the community. During the open days, community members and other interested groups, including the NGLWG, visit the farms of experimenting farmers and discuss progress.
3. *Community workshops.* After an experiment has been completed, communities meet in a workshop, facilitated by the NGLWG, to discuss the benefits or otherwise of a given practice.
4. *NGLWG meetings.* Process issues and results of the process are subjected to peer review.

Facilitating development of the partnership

Initially, ACDEP facilitated the NGLWG partnership. Within a year, other network members started to assume facilitation roles. ILEIA soon devolved authority and responsibility for the network to the Ghanaian partners. The NGLWG saw this as a sign of genuine partnership with collective responsibility for the success or failure of the project. It showed ILEIA's confidence in the local partners, who then felt challenged to live up to these expectations.

New potential members in the network are invited to take part in annual training workshops held by the NGLWG. Those whose interest is heightened by this interaction keep contact with the group and eventually become members. Membership does not require cash payment, but rather an investment of time and a willingness to make inputs into NGLWG activities. Members perceive the main benefit to be that of an association with professionals from different backgrounds; this provides stimulus for continuing the partnership.

Conflict is not avoided and differences are aired openly. During formation of the network, behind-the-scene negotiation was used as a tool in conflict resolution. From experience, NGLWG members were well aware of the potential dangers should a network totally depend on external support. The members decided to stay together, with or without external influences. NGLWG members have, over time, developed a strong bond of trust and mutual respect. All views are considered important. Each member is expected to listen to the others. This creates an environment conducive for members to agree or disagree with the general line of thought. As a result, members have come to accept and act according to group decisions after careful and, in some instances, long debates.

Organisation and management of the partnership

Structure

The NGLWG borrowed the management system of ACDEP, where authority lies with the members. Thus, a horizontal coordinating structure according to principles of collective management evolved. Committees mandated by the members execute the various functions of the network. The NGLWG forms a Research Coordinating Committee (RCC) for each PTD activity. The composition of the RCC depends on the expertise required to backstop the work as well as a member's availability to be involved at that time of the year. The RCC works as a facilitating group that frequently visits farmers who are conducting PTD experiments.

Communication

The ACDEP Secretariat serves as the NGLWG Secretariat. Invitations to meetings are by formal letter and also by phone, where possible. Most NGLWG members work in

rural areas where access to the Internet is difficult. E-mail is not a common form of communication within the group. The members meet face-to-face several times a year at NGLWG meetings, networking meetings and training workshops, and while implementing fieldwork in support of farmers' experimentation.

Working culture

The NGLWG has no written rules or sanctions but has, over time, established a working culture that new members eventually imbibe. For example, the group attaches a high level of seriousness to its work while maintaining its informality. Symbols of formality such as titles (Dr, Sir, Madam etc) are never used at NGLWG meetings. All members are treated as equals.

Financial management

After the action-research project with ILEIA ended, the ACDEP Secretariat continued to source external funding to carry out activities, including support for the functioning of the NGLWG. Funds have been allocated so as to support activities facilitated by ACDEP stations. The NGLWG is a source of resource persons who provide technical backstopping to the stations as required.

Transparency is one of the foremost requirements for developing trust and respect within a network. In the NGLWG, few things – if any – are kept secret. All members have access to project formulation documents and budgets. What can or cannot be done without the limits of each project is openly discussed.

NGLWG and PROLINNOVA

When ACDEP received information about PROLINNOVA, the NGLWG was quick to show interest in the project supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to design a national PROLINNOVA programme. To be able to link up easily with national bodies, including the IFAD-funded Root and Tuber Improvement Programme (RTIP), it was necessary to involve a network in southern Ghana. This is how ECASARD (Ecumenical Association for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development) came into the picture.

ACDEP (in northern Ghana) and ECASARD (in southern Ghana) agreed to work together, and asked the Ghana Organic Agricultural Network (GOAN) to coordinate the PROLINNOVA work in the middle belt of the country. Recognition of IK and local innovation forms the common interest that binds the NGLWG, ECASARD and GOAN members. With GOAN's entrance, the stage was set for building a new type of partnership across networks and across zones within Ghana. In each zone, the major stakeholders in agricultural R&D are involved in a Zonal Working Group. Following a series of consultations, it was decided that ECASARD, GOAN and NGLWG would act as contact points for the R&D stakeholders in their respective zones, with ECASARD playing an overall coordinating role in PROLINNOVA–Ghana.

During the inception phase of PROLINNOVA–Ghana in 2003, workshops were held in the southern, middle and northern zones. These workshops fed into a national workshop where participants from each zone presented the results of their zonal workshops and drew up plans for the coming years.

Members of the Zonal Working Groups are responsible for implementing the PROLINNOVA activities in their respective zones. At national level, a Country Coordinator was selected from the NGO community. The members of the National Steering Committee represent the major governmental and non-governmental institutions in agricultural R&D in Ghana. This committee acts like a Board of Directors in assisting and advising the Country Coordinator and ensuring transparency in running the programme. A monitoring system is being set up to ensure that PROLINNOVA activities are carried out properly and to serve as a means of country-wide information exchange and learning.

Facilitating the development of this new national-level partnership has met several challenges. Communication between stakeholders has proved to be difficult, as conditions differ across the country and across institutions. The NGLWG is the oldest and most stable of the three networks. The other two are learning from its experience. At the national workshop, the problems faced thus far were openly discussed. For example, the failure to attract the research community in the south was discussed at length. Suggestions were made on how to improve the situation, e.g. through strategic targeting of potential partners in research, as the NGLWG has done for years.

At the national workshop, differences between the three networks emerged. Each network is used to different levels of transparency. For example, all NGLWG members had been privy to all PROLINNOVA documents, but this was not the case within the other two networks. The need for total openness on issues was stressed.

Outlook

The PROLINNOVA strategy of working with and through multi-stakeholder partnerships provides an opportunity not only to work together with farmers, as NGOs have been doing in the past, but also to institutionalise partnerships as a strategy to promote R&D that builds on IK and local innovation processes. There is great value in exchanging experiences both within and between countries. This will contribute to carrying partnerships to a higher level and influencing R&D policy.

The partnership-building process among the networks in the three zones of Ghana is benefiting from the experience made over the last ten years by the NGLWG. The freedom to exchange information and to discuss the difficulties encountered in networking in the different zones provides a promising window for further development.

This article was written by Joy Bruce and N Karbo of the Animal Research Institute in Nyankpala, and Malex Alebekiya of ACDEP (Association of Church Development Projects) in Tamale, Ghana. Their analysis of the Ghana experience in building multi-stakeholder partnerships to promote local innovation was made for the First International Workshop of PROLINNOVA (Promoting Local Innovation in Ecologically-Oriented Agriculture and Natural Resource Management), held in March 2004 at the Furra Institute of Development Studies in Yirgalem, Ethiopia. More information is available under www.prolinnova.net. Contact: jpbruce@africaonline.com.gh