3.1 Challenges and conflicts as part of partnership building

Engaging farmer organisations (Will Critchley)

In most partnerships, challenges and problems will appear sooner or later (Box 9). When they do occur, it's a matter of dealing with them in a way such that conflict can be minimised or resolved. Unnecessary conflict (for example, because of misunderstandings or insufficiently clarified roles) can be prevented through appropriate mechanisms. However, it is important to remember that conflict is intrinsic to the process of building multi-stakeholder partnerships – in which by definition each partner retains its own interests or "stakes" while simultaneously "sharing". This is even more so in a partnership that has the objective to bring about institutional change and a shift in the relations of power and influence.

Box 9: Strife and conflict as part of partnership building

"The institutional and policy changes required for scaling-up successes achieved on a pilot scale, cause strife and conflict for which appropriate communication and negotiation strategies and methodologies are needed" (Röling & Wagemakers 1998). During the Prolinnova workshop on partnership building, the South African participants expressed it this way: "In a multi-stakeholder partnership diversity is inevitable and necessary for change and transformation. Different stakeholders will have different and often opposing expectations. Diversity is the starting point from which common ground is to emerge. Actors will need to articulate and embrace each other's perspectives. However, they also must be able to articulate their reason for partnering. This will form the basis from which a common vision can be developed, as well as a mission statement. Consensus building is key in this process."

The following paragraphs discuss some of the most frequent sources of conflicts, the reasons behind them, as well as a number of ways that may help to handle or even prevent them.

3.2 Clarification of roles and responsibilities

The issue of overlapping roles has been raised in the previous chapter as a possible source of inefficiency, confusion or even conflict. Formalising roles through written agreements can only go some way to prevent such conflict. Partners need to be encouraged to express their needs and interests, making it clear what their goals are and how they intend to make use of the platform.

This is when the power relationship between the partners may become evident: partners that are bigger in size, influence and financial resources may claim a relative bigger role for themselves. This can be accepted only if other partners agree with this expanded role. A situation where decisions are made on the basis of power must be avoided.

Thus, a constant effort to review, and where necessary redefine, changing roles and responsibilities can help to avoid tensions in the future. In the words of one of the facilitators of a country partnership: "A clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities and benefits expected of each of the partners goes a long way in sorting out potential conflict areas, ensuring that the right partners are identified and achieving commitment to the activities in the partnership" (Farmer Support Group 2004).

3.3 Addressing underlying attitudes and values

A partnership needs to be built on shared vision and values. If partners have very different values or attitudes regarding the central objectives, tensions will arise and partners will fail to achieve results. Therefore, from the outset, partners need to be encouraged to look into some core values and basic principles. These refer to those related to the partnership building itself (Chapter 2) as well as those embedded in the theme of the partnership, for example, those related to working with farmers and farmer innovators on an equal basis, PID, valuing farmers' knowledge and respect for local cultures. The facilitator may add these to the agenda when participants in meetings discuss either the partnership or the PID approach.

3.4 Differences in pace of partners

Here again, it is important that the facilitating organisation does not push the partnership forward, but makes sure that all partners genuinely agree with main decisions and steps taken. This will avoid conflicts within the partnership in the future. It implies accepting that stakeholders may work at difference paces. Stakeholders may differ with respect to the speed in which they can take on board new ideas, make decisions and act. These differences should be respected. It is important that sufficient time is taken to develop a common understanding of the goals and strategies that are to be pursued jointly, and to identify factors and conditions for transparency and accountability, in order to ensure that the process is jointly owned by all partners.

3.5 Preventing bureaucracy

Bureaucracy can become a burden of an expanding partnership and can kill its fundamental spirit. The more the number of partners, the more the paperwork, and the administrative costs, including time. This bureaucracy tends to consume people's time and energy, eroding the commitment and enthusiasm of partners, especially when only one partner carries this extra administrative burden. It is therefore important to keep in mind that not all details have to be formalised. Written agreements need to be signed when funds are being handled, but these should focus on the principles rather than detailed procedures "set in stone", avoiding spending too much time and energy on too many little details. After all, the basis of a "good" partnership is mutual trust.

3.6 Ensuring quality facilitation

Poor facilitation is often a reason why partnerships fail to achieve good results. A facilitating organisation is in a difficult position, as it must focus on mediating in the partnership and assuming as neutral a role as possible. To ensure the success of a partnership, it is crucial to have effective facilitators of meetings. Only then can stakeholders come together and effectively discuss issues, find common ground and agree on joint action.

The ground rules for effective facilitation include at least the following:

- Involve partners in setting the agenda: ask this beforehand and again at the beginning of the meeting; give enough time and importance to "Any other business";
- Prevent over-use of protocol (cutting out addresses such as "Mr Chairman" and the use of formal language);
- Use participatory methods where possible; there are good resource books on these;
- Permit and encourage an informal atmosphere.

Often it is worth considering obtaining the services of an experienced, external facilitator, someone who understands, but is not directly involved in the issue at stake. This can be particularly useful at critical planning moments or when conflicts need to be resolved.

3.7 Preventing conflicts over money or other benefits

Many partnerships falter because of strife over resources; money is a major source of conflict. People attending partnership meetings may be suspicious about availability of resources and how these will be shared. Being aware of this is one step towards preventing more serious disagreements or conflicts on resources. Clear and transparent agreements concerning allowances for attending workshops, for example, need to be arrived at. People should not just show up for the extra money – and most of all should not debate levels of compensation at workshops – but receive adequate, yet reasonable, compensation for the energy and drive they bring to make the partnership work.

There are a number of key issues to keep in mind in order to prevent conflicts about money:

- Be open about available budgets and each partner's potential share in them;

- On this basis, jointly set standards for compensation of travel and other allowances; show the implications that a high level of allowances have for other budget items (less on-the-ground activities!);
- Clarify what benefits partners can expect to gain from a partnership and what they would be expected to contribute: knowledge, recognition, contacts and/or the satisfaction of doing meaningful work. In the words of Prolinnova–Ghana: "Members perceive the chief benefit to be that of an association with professionals from different backgrounds, which itself provides stimulus for continuing the partnership";
- Use the principle of "own contribution" (Chapter 2) to underline that the partnership is not just a means to acquire easy money;
- Share "rewarding" tasks and activities widely such as representing the partnership abroad, attending (international) training, or being interviewed by media.

3.8 Handling non-performing partners

A difficult situation to handle, yet a very common source of conflict in a partnership, is the under-performance of one of the partners: when it does not do the tasks or provide its contributions as expected. Sometimes being within a partnership can be abused by a partner; an organisation can hide behind the partnership so it does *not* have to take responsibility, leaving this to the other partners, rather than everyone helping each other. Often it is not simple to stop working with such a partner, or – in extreme cases – to "expel" that partner from the platform. This could result in a possible loss of the work done before, plus potential failure of the joint projects as well as problems regarding contractual obligations.

Several measures can be taken before formally ending the collaboration with a non-performing partner:

- Create peer-review pressure: make the non- (or poorer) functioning of partners visible. Partners can, for example, be asked to bring and display reports, documents and products of the past year in an annual meeting. This creates a feeling of competition for those who seem to be lagging behind;
- (Threaten to) make malfunctioning of a poorly performing partner explicit: for example, mention in progress reports that no data from a particular partner have been received;
- Withhold resources and/or membership in partnership. Here is where the need for an MOU is most clear. The MOU formulates various responsibilities, as well as steps that can be taken in case of non-performance; a strong governing structure, once created, can help to "referee" such cases, as illustrated in Box 10.

Box 10: A case of conflict management in Prolinnova

Thus far, a significant conflict has arisen once between the Prolinnova secretariat and a country programme coordinator because of low performance. The Prolinnova Oversight Group played an important role in this conflict as an impartial mediator between the secretariat and the country programme concerned. In one POG meeting, a member of the NSC was invited to report and share his analysis and compare it with that of the secretariat. The POG agreed on a number of steps for the country programme to try to solve the performance problem itself and advised the secretariat to support this process.

3.9 Engaging farmers' organisations

When working in a partnership that promotes farmers' interests, their direct involvement in the partnership itself is critical. However, in practice it poses a challenge to do this in a meaningful way. If farmers are not yet organised, their involvement can be initiated through PID interaction at the field level. Their involvement in programme coordination and decision-making, the formal partnership, may then emerge gradually. This needs to be strategised specifically if it is to be successful. Direct involvement in programme coordination and policy-setting is possible, and essential, when relevant farmer organisations or networks exist. In some cases, smaller community-based farmer organisations can fill the gap until a larger farmer organisation emerges.

The issue of representation is relevant for all partners but is particularly important for organisations that represent a large constituency such as farmers. Can they speak for truly small-scale farmers? Are these involved in the organisation at all? How independent is the organisation from specific political interests?

In order to make sure that farmers can effectively participate in meetings, thought needs to be given to language and translation. Farmers representing small-scale farmer interests may speak only the local language. If partnership meetings or their preparatory documents have to make use of English or any other foreign language, the facilitating organisation has to ensure that these become accessible to those who do not master that language. Informing them in advance of the issues that will be discussed is another way to make sure the farmers understand and can participate as fully as possible in the meetings.

3.10 Engaging researchers

Engaging researchers in partnerships promoting participatory R&D has been found problematic: what motivates and what discourages them? Researchers initially seem receptive to new ideas such as experimenting with farmers and adding to innovations/local knowledge/indigenous knowledge. Often they assume, however, that they will continue be in the driver's seat during the innovation processes of "joint experimentation". In reality, the PID approach reduces the authority of formal researchers while it tends to empower farmers and extension workers. When researchers see that the innovative farmer or the extension people have the lead, it is difficult for researchers to understand their new role and to remain committed. The challenge becomes even larger when scientists are involved who are not familiar with a participatory approach to research and development.

Being aware of this challenge is one step already in addressing it. In most cases, joint workshops are very effective, in which farmers, extension workers and formal researchers sit together, follow joint training in PID and jointly plan PID work on the ground. This can create both a common understanding of the concepts as well as a personal bond (Box 11).

Box 11: Integration of researchers: example from Prolinnova–South Africa

In South Africa a capacity-building programme was initiated in 2004, involving over 25 government and civil society organisations involved in agriculture and rural development. They identified and documented over twenty innovations of smallholder farmers. The results were published in a catalogue which was launched at a two-day National Stakeholder Workshop in February 2005. As a result of this workshop, the participants gained competence in recognising and supporting innovation by resource-poor farmers. They now also have a common understanding of how PID can be used as an approach to engage farmers, researchers and field staff in local innovation practices.

There are systemic problems in involving researchers. One is the problem of scale. Research organisations are usually large and semi-centralised, where individual researchers – even if interested – find it hard to create the room to support new ideas. Considerable investment (in terms of time and creativity, though not necessarily funds) may be required by research institutions to reorganise and learn to become active supporters of such a new idea as PID.

The critical message to the researchers and their organisations should be that, despite an emphasis in PID on the role of farmers and extension workers, their role remains very important – different though it may be from the past. It includes, for example, providing deeper knowledge and insight on innovations under development, helping systematically to analyse the results of experiments, compiling information and results into written documents and so forth. This is why it remains essential that researchers are involved in the partnerships.

3.11 The GO-NGO interface

Partnership and collaboration between NGOs and government agencies is another dimension that may merit specific attention. For both parties, working together with this intensity and as truly equal partners is often new. The considerable differences in working cultures can be a constraint. This is often reflected in the different language used by NGOs and government agencies which, sadly, can cause miscommunication and misunderstanding.

The GO-NGO interface is complicated because of conflicting working modalities and procedures. When such conflicts appear frequently, the NSC members may need to spend much of their time in conflict resolution and talking about procedural matters.

The challenge is to recognise these cultural differences, making them a point of attention and trying to establish a specific common working culture within the NSC and the Core Team of implementers. The international Prolinnova meetings set an example by, for instance, doing away with formal titles such as "Dr" and "Prof" (as noted already), by sharing the role of chairing sessions, and by applying participatory workshop techniques in general. In some countries, though, the use of formal titles is still very much favoured since it brings with it a certain status and level of respect.

3.12 Conclusion

Clearly, many of the problems raised here are curable. The process of building and maintaining partnerships must go through numerous phases of contesting theories and "truths", deconstructing beliefs and mediating disputes and negotiating agreements. This is part of the joint learning process.

However, it is clear that there is no single solution for making a partnership succeed where problems arise. There is no magic pill, so to speak, to cure every illness. In each case, the specificities of history, existing power relations, economic structures, cultural factors, politics and policies must be taken into account. It is for this reason that Prolinnova encourages each country-level partnership to find its own path and develop own structures and mechanisms. Sharing experiences across country programmes enables us to face the challenges and make improvements when necessary.

Working together in multi-stakeholder partnerships is a challenge, and problems are bound to arise. Being aware of them in advance may help avoiding the worst pitfalls. Many lessons will be learnt simply by doing. Monitoring and evaluation this process is fundamental to build a strong partnership.