

## **Building partnerships to promote local innovation processes**

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### **Introduction**

An international partnership programme called PROLINNOVA seeks to build partnerships among major stakeholders in agricultural research and development to enhance processes of farmer-led participatory innovation. It starts with identifying innovations developed by farmers in order to give recognition to their creativity and to serve as entry points to genuine partnership in local-level research and development. The stakeholders involved in 'Participatory Innovation Development' (PID) reflect on how it differs from the way they conventionally go about their work. They consider whether and how it leads to better results, above all, to strengthening the capacity of farmers and other actors to continue to innovate and adapt to changing conditions. They identify what institutional and policy changes are needed to enhance PID. On the basis of their joint analysis and the on-the-ground PID cases, they engage in policy dialogue to bring about these changes.

This chapter describes the PROLINNOVA initiative and the concepts behind it, the structure of partnerships at different levels – field, national and international – to promote local innovation and the experiences made in trying to establish them. Particular attention is given to the role of NGOs in facilitating these multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs).

### **Participatory innovation development**

The starting point of PID is recognizing and documenting local people's creativity and ingenuity. Innovations developed by farmers and other users of natural resources include new tools, new techniques or new ways of co-managing resources, communicating or organizing (see Box for example). Recognizing local innovation changes the actors' images of others and of themselves. When formally-educated professionals discover farmers' own innovations, they begin to see farmers in a different light: not just as people who should receive and adopt technologies but rather as people with something valuable to offer that is complementary to their own scientific knowledge. This changes the way they behave towards farmers.

At the same time, the farmers gain in self-esteem. They start to see themselves as people rich in knowledge, ideas and ingenuity in surviving under difficult conditions – as people to be admired. The farmers are more likely to regard their admirers as potential partners in development. Thus local innovations can become focal points for innovative farmers and their communities to examine – together with researchers and/or development agents – the problems and opportunities that local people have already identified and then to plan joint experiments to explore relevant ideas further and to evaluate the results together. The interaction of scientists and technical experts with research-minded farmers also builds farmers' capacities to engage in dialogue with other stakeholders.

## **Multi-stakeholder partnerships to bring about change**

Bringing about the institutional change to create space for change on the ground requires collaboration among key stakeholders at sub-national or national level, as well as at international level, starting with platforms that can grow into partnerships. 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 realize their objectives. Within the platform, the actors discuss and clarify their viewpoints and seek common ground for planning joint action (Röling and Jiggins, 1998). A 'partnership' implies an agreement between different stakeholders to analyse, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate activities together, sharing resources, risks, costs and benefits. The term 'stakeholders' encompasses all people who have an interest in the issue at hand, in this case, agricultural research and development (ARD). MSPs are partnerships that involve several different groups of stakeholders such as governmental agencies, NGOs, research institutes, business groups, consumer groups and, of course, farmer groups.

The main emphasis in PROLINNOVA has been on building MSPs at country level. The lead is usually taken by a field-based development-support NGO with skills not only in technical aspects but also in social issues such as organizational development, conflict management and gender sensitivity. Inception activities bring together people from the major institutions of agricultural research, extension and education in the country to analyse jointly their experiences in recognizing local initiatives and engaging in participatory ARD. On this basis, each country programme (CP) has developed action plans to improve and scale up such activities, and set up a platform of key stakeholders to steer and learn from the process.

From the start, the CP partners defined a number of important activities required at the international level. These include capacity building and methodological support, web-based information management, documentation and publishing, and international policy dialogue. Special attention was to be given to facilitating mutual learning through comparative analysis of experiences of the CPs. This is done through jointly developed monitoring and evaluation procedures, looking at the operations of the CPs as well as at how the international partnership functions. The national and international partners in the programme thus learn how to strengthen their training, networking and communication activities; how to improve the structure and functioning of the multi-stakeholder platforms; and how to be more effective in policy dialogue and in bringing about institutional change.

### **Some initial achievements**

#### *Energies generated by recognizing farmer innovation*

The existence of local innovations and the relevance of these innovations for improving livelihoods of smallholder families has been recognized and documented through inventories and studies of local innovations and related posters, videos, brochures, leaflets and database entries. Amazing energies have been generated among farmers and scientists simply by undertaking this exercise. Farmers are proud to be able to present their innovations to formally educated 'experts', both in the field and at national and international workshops while scientists are fascinated that farmers have found solutions to problems with which scientists have been grappling for years, e.g. bacterial wilt in *enset* in southern Ethiopia.

### *Basis laid for integration into mainstream institutions*

The CP platforms have organized the training of several hundred people in institutions of research, development and higher education in PID concepts and practices, in an iterative learning approach that involves application in their day-to-day work. Initial activities are underway in several countries to incorporate the methodology and examples of PID into learning at universities and technical colleges.

### *Piloting alternative funding mechanisms for farmer-led experimentation*

PROLINNOVA is addressing issues of power in ARD by piloting research funding mechanisms that allow farmers to exert real influence on research agendas. PROLINNOVA partners developed the concept of 'Local Innovation Support Funds' (LISFs) that would allow innovative small-scale farmers or farmer groups to access funds directly to finance locally-mandated research, to hire external resource persons who would support farmers' efforts, to link up with other innovators and further sources of relevant information, and to share their findings more widely. This is expected to increase the relevance of research for smallholders and to speed up processes of local innovation (Waters-Bayer et al., 2005; van Veldhuizen et al., 2006). In the first full year of operation, LISFs in five countries jointly approved 121 applications of farmers and farmer groups with grants ranging from EUR 40 (Cambodia) to EUR 700 (South Africa). From the outset, attention has been given to issues of fund sustainability; if the LISFs prove to be effective in enhancing local innovation processes, some public funds for ARD could be channelled through them.

## **Challenges and attempts to deal with them**

For most of the NGOs involved, seeking partnership with government agencies has meant a fundamental shift in their own approach, as they had previously taken either separate (often parallel) or confrontational paths. Now their role has become one of creating space for farmers, NGOs and government agencies to come together and find common ground. Such diverse stakeholders will clearly have different perspectives. The process of building partnerships among them goes 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 has presented several challenges.

### *Dealing with diversity of interests*

Given that PROLINNOVA seeks to bring about a shift in the relations of power and influence and ultimately in how resources are used, conflict cannot be completely avoided even where the responsibilities and benefits of each partner have been clearly outlined. Political awareness and competencies are needed to manage this process. Facilitating NGOs often have only a small number of the very capable and committed people with good connections who are needed for this delicate task. In all cases NGOs have chosen to work with engaged individuals within the targeted ARD organizations and thereby to address issues at the institutional and management level.

### *Dealing with hierarchies*

In a partnership, it is important to establish a culture of equality. In many countries, however, government organizations initially find it difficult to accept an NGO as coordinating organization, particularly in ARD activities (cf. Ejigu and Waters-Bayer, 2005). Perseverance and time is needed to gain their confidence. By recognizing the creativity of farmers and giving their knowledge and innovations the same value as those of formally educated scientists, the PROLINNOVA programme deliberately tries to break down hierarchies and to establish working relationships based on mutual respect.

### *Creating shared ownership*

Partnership implies shared ownership of the agenda and programme of activities, and an overall sense of joint responsibility for outcomes. This may be a challenge for coordinating NGOs who do not always realize that this is not their project but rather a joint endeavour. To achieve shared ownership CPs are encouraged to continue participatory planning with partners, to share and be transparent on tasks and resources and to ask partners at all levels not just to *receive* but also to *commit* resources.

### *Dealing with slow-moving mindsets and institutions*

Decades of a top-down approach to ARD means that many formally educated people are slow to comprehend that farmers have developed new technologies and institutions without external support. Even those who do recognize local innovation still often think in terms of transferring the site-specific local innovations to other places where they may not fit, or trying to convince the innovative and potentially 'model' farmers to demonstrate introduced technologies. More meaningful engagement in farmer-led PID, particularly for research institutes, may be promoted by the increasing pressure being exerted by donors and governments on formal research to show its impact – as PID partnerships at various levels offer researchers in the formal sector an opportunity to do this.

### *Focusing on process rather than innovations*

The initial focus on studying local innovations can prevent partners from comprehending that PROLINNOVA is trying to promote local innovation *processes*, not just the resulting innovations. Rather than measuring success according to how many farmers have adopted certain local innovations, the focus is on enhancing a continuing process of local innovation and scaling up the approach to involve millions of farmers and the mainstream institutions of ARD. Challenging discussions among partners, both face-to-face and virtually, are used for clarifying concepts and bringing in the wider perspective.

### *Dealing with farmer 'representation'*

Because PROLINNOVA aims to institutionalize participatory approaches to ARD, the main 'target' groups are the institutions involved in ARD. These should also include farmer institutions. At the beginning, however, farmer involvement in governance structures was not strong. Only the CPs in Cambodia and Tanzania included farmer organizations in the national steering committee; in other countries, farmers were sometimes 'represented' through networks working on their behalf (e.g. the Pastoral Development Forum in Ethiopia). Where democratic organizations of smallholder farmers are absent, the emphasis is on bringing the *perspectives* of (research-minded) farmers into the platforms through, e.g. farmers who come from Farmer Research Groups or Farmer Field Schools.

### *Dealing with Intellectual Property Rights*

The issue of property rights when studying local innovations has been high on the PROLINNOVA agenda. Generally, partners found that patenting of local innovations is often not feasible and also not desirable. Vibrant innovation systems thrive from open and frequent sharing among people with different experiences and ideas (*cf* Douthwaite, 2002). By documenting information about local innovations and innovators and making this more widely available, the partners – including the innovators themselves – agree to bring the innovations into the public domain. But CPs are aware that in specific cases, where commercial interests are potentially high, formal legal protection may need to be sought and are exploring country-specific regulations to do so.

## Looking ahead

Progress in institutionalizing participatory ARD is slow, as is the process of building MSPs to bring this about. Most lessons are being learnt by doing, and sometimes through errors. 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, trying to analyse and understand the process of building and managing partnerships and bringing about institutional change.

The commitment of current partners and the interest of other individuals and organizations to promote participatory innovation processes are leading to the development of a genuine community of practice. They are communicating with each other because they believe in what they are doing and value the mutual learning and peer support. Partners at country level are increasingly taking their own initiative in generating resources to be able to pursue their jointly formulated objectives. They are beginning to find ways to link the objectives of the platform to their own institutional mandates and are devoting themselves to the task irrespective of individual projects. This vision beyond projects suggests that the partnerships at various levels – from the ground to the global – have some chance for sustainability.

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## Box: Promoting Farmer Innovation and Experimentation in the Sahel (PROFEIS)

Assétou Kanouté

PROFEIS is an initiative to promote farmer innovation in order to contribute to food security and natural resource conservation in Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mali. Started in late 2006 with support from Misereor, and associated with the PROLINNOVA network, its aim is to: (i) strengthen capacities in agricultural research institutions, extension services, NGOs and CBOs to provide effective support for farmer-led experimentation and innovation in natural resource management; and (ii) accelerate the dissemination to resource-poor farmers of innovations generating improved yields in an environmentally sustainable manner.

In Mali, PROFEIS has been led by a partnership involving AOPP (Association des Organisations Professionnelles Paysannes, a network of farmer organizations), ADAF/Gallè (an NGO) and IER (Institut d'Economie Rurale, a national agricultural research centre), in collaboration with ICRAF (the World Agroforestry Centre). The partners have focused on identifying and supporting farmer innovations related to biodiversity conservation and management in Ségou Region since early 2007. Specifically, the initiative has documented and tested farmer innovations relating to the conservation of sorghum and millet varieties, soil fertility management and agroforestry practices.

Among the 38 farmer innovations identified and assessed in Ségou during both the rainy and dry seasons, six have been selected for joint experimentation by the partners thus far:

1. A beaten clay incubator developed by Nouhoum Traoré of the village of Djela (Gouendo Commune);
2. A method for breeding of *pintadeau* (young guinea fowl) developed by Bakary Daou of the village of Kanouala (Kéméni Commune);
3. An organizational innovation developed by Moulaye Coumaré of the village of Kalabougou (Farako Commune);
4. A method to combat striga weed with leaf powder from the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) and the néré tree (*Parkia biglobosa*) developed by Bakary Konitié Dembelé of the village of Saye (Sana Commune);
5. A method to combat striga weed with néré powder developed by Bakary Dembelé of the village of Saro (Saloba Commune);
6. A way to graft *gounan* (*Sclerocarya birrea*) and *pegou* (*Lannea microcarpa*) developed by Sidiki Coulibaly of the village of Zembougou-Mangoni (Niasso Commune).

PROFEIS-Mali is now bringing together farmers, extension workers and researchers to explore these and other farmer innovations across Ségou, working through a network of farmer organizations. It is also supporting learning and dissemination through farmer-to-farmer exchanges.

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