

Promoting inclusion of civil society organizations (CSOs) in African Agricultural Research and Development

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Abstract

This paper discusses the promotion of civil society organizations in particular, Farmers' organizations, agric-business, and non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) in African agricultural research. Civil society has been recognized as an important potential partner in agricultural development but their active participation in agricultural programs and activities remain largely elusive. Although many reasons are responsible for their weak participation, institutional capacity and organizations remain a key constraint. To redress this, the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) in partnership with the Global Forum for Agricultural Research (GFAR), facilitates the mobilization of existing but weak sub-regional farmers' organizations, agric-business and NGOs respectively, to more proactively engage with the research and development system. At the initiative of the civil society organizations therefore, and with the support of FARA and GFAR, sub-regional farmers' organizations formed the 'Africa Alliance of sub-regional farmers organization' while agri-business resolved to launch a Pan-African Private sector agri-business initiative, both of which realign with the initiative of the sub-Saharan Africa NGO Consortium in engaging the Sub-Regional Organizations (SROs), FARA, and the global research and development community in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of agricultural programs, projects and initiatives.

Key words: farmers' organizations, agri-business, sub-Saharan Africa NGO Consortium, research for development

Introduction

The potential contribution of civil society to agricultural research and development has been widely recognized by governments, international institutions and development agencies. Resolutions from United Nations (UN) conferences in the last decade, including the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), call for the full integration of civil society in the implementation of agriculture programmes and projects. Specifically they call for inclusiveness, transparency and participation of all stakeholders. These non-state actors have also been accepted at the international level as genuine partners in the process of sustainable development.

Because African agriculture is becoming increasingly unattractive, the children of farmer's do not see a future in farming. This results in further migration of rural people to urban areas. Although civil society organizations (CSOs) in particular, farmers' organizations (FOs), agri-business and

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are engaged in the agricultural sector, their involvement in agricultural research for developmentⁱ remains weak. Reversing the trend should help make agriculture a more viable livelihood option for the resource-poor and should also foster social cohesion and environmental conservation (FARA, 2006).

Non-governmental organizations, farmers' organization, and agri-business are active to some degree at the policy level. For instance, some NGOs have been quick to point out implications or impacts of particular policies and or programmes especially on the poor, whether home-grown or promoted by external agencies and interests. Although a number of CSO stakeholder groups exist in African agriculture, the strongest voice being heard are the NGOs. Farmers' organizations and small-medium enterprises on the other hand are still unable to provide a coordinated position at national, sub-regional (Eastern and Central, Western and Central, and Southern Africa respectively) and regional (Africa-wide) levels of African agricultural research and development (ARD).

FARA in partnership with the Global Forum for Agricultural Research (GFAR) therefore embarked on strengthening the capacity of existing FOs, agri-business and NGOs to enable them to more proactively influence the agricultural research and development agenda for the benefit of small-scale producers (FARA, 2005). FARA, which was established to harness collaboration across the continent and to add value to the work of the Sub-Regional Organizations (SROs) in supporting the National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS), is well positioned to mobilize CSOs. Since FARA was founded in 2002, there have been many changes in the organization of African agricultural research and development including the strengthening of the SROs and the linkages with the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the African Union (AU) New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD).

To facilitate the implementation of the AU-NEPAD agricultural agenda in line with its Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program (CAADP) and in particular, CAADP Pillar IV on agricultural research, technology dissemination and adoption, FARA acts as the technical arm of the AU-NEPAD. FARA therefore developed the Framework for African Agricultural Productivity (FAAP) to guide the implementation of CAADP Pillar IV. The FAAP intentionally placed farmers and other end users of research at the heart of the framework in order to enable them to take control of agricultural research for development in Africa.

The active involvement of end user groups in agricultural research and development is a fundamental development pre-requisite. The 'farmer first' approach argued that much of the problem with conventional agricultural research and extension lies with the processes of generating and transferring technologies, and that much of the solution lies with farmers' own capacities and participation in the research process. In general, technologies needed complementary organisational, policy and other changes to enable them to be put into productive use. There has also been recognition that the organisation of agricultural research and extension itself was a major reason why science was failing to improve the livelihoods of poor people (Scoones et al., 2007).

The African agricultural landscape has changed rapidly and many service providers are involved in knowledge and technology generation in addition to the conventional research and development institutions (public research and extension). Sumberg (2005) indicated that by bringing all "stakeholders" fully into the research process, the focus will shift from "research for its own sake" to "research for development" and for research establishments, this will mean a "new way of doing business". More importantly however, this reflects a basic change of dynamic that he referred to as the "politics of inclusion".

The linear research-extension-farmer linkage and technology transfer approach championed by the public extension service in 1960s and 1970s can no longer play an effective role in agricultural service delivery. There have since been a proliferation of non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) in agricultural service delivery and the private sector in particular, is

increasingly active in input markets and to a limited extent, output markets. Farmers have also become more organized although their capacity to act collectively is often limited. National farmers' organizations are organized around commodity and or sector value chains and these form the foundations of the sub-regional farmers' organizations which engage in policy advocacy and resource rights and use.

This paper therefore highlights the challenges and opportunities in effectively engaging three key civil society stakeholder organizations (Farmers' Organizations, agri-business and NGOs) in agricultural research.

Challenges and opportunities in facilitating the participation of civil society organizations in agriculture research

The Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) in partnership with GFAR has since 2005, actively advocated the involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in African agriculture at the national, sub-regional and regional levels. FARA and GFAR therefore pulled together and facilitated the mobilization of existing farmers' organizations (FOs), agri-business, and NGOs in mainstream ARD processes and mechanisms.

Farmers' Organizations

Although national farmers' organizations (FOs) have existed for decades in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), it is only in 2000s that active sub-regional farmers' organizations emerged and this marks a important turning point. The highly significant but weak sub-regional farmer organizations *Réseau des organisations des paysannes & de producteurs de l'Afrique de l'Ouest* (ROPPA) founded in 2000 and the *Eastern Africa farmers' Federation* (EAFF) in 2001 respectively, as well as the *Sub-regional Platform of Peasant Organizations of Central Africa* (PROPAC) and the *Southern Africa Confederation of Agricultural Unions* (SACAU), provide an institutional framework and voice for a plethora and previously uncoordinated national farmer organizations. Although the sub-regional farmers' organizations are themselves functional, albeit with some institutional difficulties, these have no common, Africa-wide, platform to coordinate their actions and activities.

Farmers' institutions however remain generally weak and farmers continue to be poorly represented in agricultural research for development. Although some degree of farmer participation in research programs exists, their full participation in the governance, planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of research is still very poor. Farmer groups themselves have problems of representation and in general, have limited capacity to efficiently manage internal and external resources and events. The management of farmer groups and retention of interest by the membership remains a fundamental challenge. Farmers and farmer groups do not have the requisite capacity to effectively engage with and participate in international trade negotiations and defend their interests in a global competitive market.

Worse still, sub-regional farmers' organizations do not have a common regional platform to effectively engage with FARA, the sub-regional organizations (SROs), national agricultural research systems (NARS) and the global community. Thus, representatives of the four active sub-regional farmer organizations (EAFF, ROPPA, PROPAC, SACAU) met at the '*Africa Agriculture Science Week and 4th FARA General Assembly 2007*' in Johannesburg, South Africa and formed the '*Africa Alliance of sub-regional Farmer Organizations (AAFO)*'. The farmer organisation for Northern Africa is expected to become a member in due course.

Agri-business

Agri-business is active in Africa as individual units but coordinated action at the sub-regional and regional levels is weak. Their failure to come up with common and coordinated mechanisms and programs has hitherto diminished collaboration with potential partners. Because of the efforts of FARA, research organizations, and financiers among others, public sector agricultural research and development organizations now recognize agri-business as a viable partner. Agri-business is both an end user and generator of innovations and therefore it needs to partner with ARD

institutions at the sub-regional, regional and global community levels. The sector has a vested interest in regional trade and tariffs, biotechnology, standards and certification, micro-finance and credit, capacity strengthening, and land tenure among others. The FARA GA 2007 endorsed the *Pan-African Agri-business Initiative* singling out three major challenges;

- how to stimulate financing of agri-businesses enterprises;
- how to minimize risks in agriculture through expanding of the business portfolio; and
- how to develop and expand both domestic and regional markets.

Some key opportunities and challenges to private sector involvement in African agriculture highlighted includes:

- wealth creation for smallholder farmers
- trust and confidence building between smallholder farmers and agri-business
- conducting science-based research and technology development and dissemination of products and services
- the private sector's profit motive implies that if risks are too high or economic benefits are unlikely, then agri-business may not play a very active role.
- competition and secrecy especially with regard to proprietary knowledge and technology remains an impediment
- the private sector does not have the patience for initiatives that are *"just about talking."*
- weaknesses in supply chain management and inadequate investment in infrastructure particularly irrigation, warehouse, cold storage, etc.
- weak linkages between private companies and public sector research organizations
- poor targeting of research activities by national agricultural research institutes (NARIs) and hence poor uptake by the private sector
- lack of higher education and professional development opportunities for private sector employees
- depressed business portfolio hence increased risks
- erratic financing facilities and poor marketing strategies
- weak policies and market environments not conducive to successful private sector participation
- need for programs that support the nurturing of new business ventures.

Sub-Saharan Africa NGO Consortium (SSA NGOC)

Since its establishment at the FARA GA 2005 in Entebbe, Uganda, the SSA NGOC has made significant progress with only limited financial resources. The Consortium, since 2005:

- initiated a mobilization process to increase active membership of the SSA NGOC and enhance linkages among NGOs
- launched a profiling/typology exercise to; (i) mobilize active membership of the consortium, and (ii) develop a database of NGOs involved in ARD with a view to facilitating NGO and research linkages and partnerships

- concluded four evidence-based case studies in sub-Saharan Africa by documenting past experiences and lessons learnt in promoting innovation and improving future linkages between CSOs and researchers
- set-up institutional arrangements by agreeing to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)
- achieved buy-in to a code of conduct for consortium leaders and members
- established an interim management committee that oversees the operations of the consortium; and
- articulated a communications strategy to better inform and educate its membership and ARD stakeholders on agricultural development in Africa.

The consortium resolved to undertake *advocacy and public awareness* on climate change, underutilised species, the role of women in agriculture and trade policies, just to mention a few. They also plan to actively engage with ARD stakeholders in facilitating end user access to research outputs in ways that transform information to knowledge and innovation. For the moment the consortium's major challenge is the strengthening of its own *institutional capacity to coordinate a diverse group of stakeholders*

Lessons learnt

As FARA and GFAR continue to work with farmer organizations, agri-business and NGOs, a number of areas need to be addressed.

Farmer organizations

- representation of FOs and group members at fora and events: *"Who is representing and speaking to farmers' name and their organizations"*
- difficulty in working on regional and sub-regional issues
- focus on capacity strengthening but yet, weak in identifying their specific capacity needs
- poor communication between and among members and their partners
- emphasis on needs and support: *what can be done for them*
- weak direct working relationship with national member organizations
- poor membership mobilization and retention
- poor application of the principle of subsidiarity among member organizations
- poor internal and external communication and governance
- lack of a coherent strategic plan and too much focus on a programmatic approach that mainly responds to funding opportunities

Agri-business

- profit orientated and relatively well organized sector
- characterized by *'quick gains'* and *'busy schedule'*
- Agri-business not in tune with support to research
- do not have time for *"long"* participatory processes
- want to make a point and pursue profit
- ready to take technology when it makes economic sense

Sub-Saharan Africa NGO Consortium

- problem of group cohesiveness and weak institutional capacity
- difficulty in matching planned activities with implementation
- voluntary focal point mechanism not working well
- interim Steering Committee still struggling
- poor communication and information exchange between and among members
- interface with farmer organizations: *who leads farmer issues? who speaks for farmers?*

Guidelines for engaging CSOs in African ARD processes and mechanisms

Recognizing the immense difficulty in mainstreaming CSOs in African agricultural research and development, FARA developed a guide that should facilitate the engagement of farmers' organizations, agri-business and NGOs with agricultural research as follows:

- both FARA and GFAR should continue to work with the CSOs in ARD at the regional level while the SROsⁱⁱ continue to strategically integrate CSOs in their governance organs and instruments.
- SROs governance and management organs and instruments continue to be more responsive to active involvement and participation of CSOs in agriculture.
- because CSOs are not generally well organized at sub-regional and regional level, SROs should provide CSO desks within their structures to support information, communication and CSO mobilization efforts.
- alternatively, SROs can offer facilities to representatives of the fairly organized sub-regional CSOs that are located in the same area as the SROs to use those facilities as 'sub-regional focal CSO desks'.
- although farmers' organizations (FOs) are fairly well established institutionally at the sub-regional level, their linkage with the SROs remains weak. SROs should therefore work with FARA, the regional farmer organizations themselves (EAFF, ROPPA, PROPAC, SACAU) and at the appropriate opportunity, the one for Northern Africa in partnership with the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) on the integration of FOs at the sub-regional level without them physically relocating at the SRO Secretariat unless where cost effective and acceptable.
- farmers' organizations need to sort out the thorny problem of representation, additional effort should be made to mainstream appropriate representation and good governance and that should be led by the sub-regional farmers' organizations themselves.
- FARA, GFAR and SROs should work with agri-business, in particular, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), to facilitate the emergence of a sub-regional organization of agri-business on similar lines as the sub-regional farmer's organization and their national structures that will form an interim regional private sector body in ARD.
- because already a Sub-Saharan Africa NGO Consortium (SSA NGOC) exists and functioning albeit with some institutional difficulties, FARA, GFAR and SROs should provide logistical support in realizing the operations of the interim Steering Committee (ISC), sub-regional focal points, and the proposed interim Secretariat to be hosted by one of the existing SSA NGOC member NGO.

Conclusion

The FARA GA 2007 endorsed *Africa Alliance of sub-regional farmer organizations (AAFO)* and the proposed *Pan-African Agri-business Initiative* will complement the efforts of the Sub-Saharan Africa NGO Consortium (SSA NGOC) and enhance end user innovation of best agricultural practices. These institutions should play a vital role in enhancing agricultural productivity and market access in African agriculture, and contribute to economic growth and wellbeing in Africa.

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ⁱ By 'research for development' we mean end users, in particular farmers, being able to influence productivity enhancing strategies and approaches for greater impact

ⁱⁱ The SROs are presently at different stages of integrating CSOs in their governance organs and instruments