

Time for a new dream?: Reflections on partnerships for ‘action research’ to realize participatory agricultural research and extension

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Abstract

[To be completed]

Introduction

For the past three decades (in some cases, longer), development organizations have worked with individuals and organizations at the grassroots to analyze local problems and identify possible solutions to agricultural and rural development. Much of this experience has been through the use and application of ‘action research’ (AR) methods - which encompass a broad range of processes designed to allow participants to systematically learn from practice (Ref.). Initially, many of these experiences were supported and promoted by NGOs, building on their long association with rural communities in many countries of the South to achieve broad community development aims (i.e., establish community organizations, offer rural credit, promote health and nutrition programmes, etc.).

In the area of agricultural development, the primary aim of much of this practice was to identify and analyze ‘problems’ and then work with community members (usually ‘farmers’) to formulate ‘solutions.’ These AR processes, however, were often led by professionals. Though over time farmer-based, and often farmer-led, approaches emerged (e.g., building on indigenous technical knowledge (ITK), the use of PRA, farmer innovators, etc.) and were recognized as having more value and offering more benefits (e.g., high community involvement, shared ownership of results, sustainability, etc.) (Wettasinha, *et al.*, 2006; Gonsalves, *et al.* 2005; Scarborough, *et al.*, 1997).

Research, reflection, analysis and documentation of these experiences - through for example experiences such as the “Farmer First” work of 20 years ago - raised the profile of these approaches, and created intellectual “space” for application by a wider set of research and development organizations, including agricultural research institutes, universities, and ministries of agriculture.

In recent years, the idea of partnerships – especially multi-stakeholder partnerships - to foster and further action research initiatives has taken hold (Critchley, *et al.*, 2006; van Veldhuizen, *et al.*, 2002). Partnerships have been increasingly viewed as a pathway to improve both the processes and outcomes of action research among farmers, development actors (especially NGOs) and research actors (Horton, *et al.*, 2003).

This article aims to offer a personal perspective on nearly two decades of practice-based involvement with partnerships around action research for participatory agricultural research and extension. The observations outlined in the article draw from my own partnership experiences through the work of two development NGOs (the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction {IIRR} and World Neighbours {WN}) and their efforts to focus on rural and agricultural development with a focus on the grassroots - including work conducted to learn about, promote and share concepts, tools, methods and practices for farmer-led extension, farmer participatory research, participatory rural appraisal and farmer and local innovation.

Though many of these partnership experiences have involved work at multiple levels (e.g., community-based, inter-organizational collaboration, GO-NGO collaboration, international networking and alliances, training and documentation for development practitioners) this paper aims to highlight key dimensions to those partnerships which were formed to conceptualize, carry-out and assess action research activities which involved community members, i.e., usually ‘farmers’ or ‘resource users’ (both men and women), towards the specific aims of participatory agricultural research and extension. More specifically, this includes experiences with action research on integrated, sustainable farming systems and community-based natural resource management experiences in Asia; action

research on farmer-led extension approaches in Central America; and action research conducted within the context of sustainable agriculture and rural livelihoods programmes in several countries.

Partnerships for agricultural development

In recent years, a number of reasons have been put forward and highlighted for farmers and agricultural development organizations to consider partnerships as a mechanism to achieve their own aims and objectives, including (among others):

- to complement own experiences, skills and capacities;
- to create 'synergies' which would accomplish outcomes beyond what could be expected from own individual efforts;
- to build and develop capacity (skills and knowledge) in partners that can be sustained; and
- to leverage resources, especially funds.

In practice, are each of these specific rationale valid objectives around which to build partnerships for participatory agricultural research and extension activities? Are there other - possibly 'hidden' – rationale for partnerships? What motivates or drives organizations to seek and cultivate partnerships with others? Are there specific reasons that farmers and their organizations consider important when contemplating entering into partnership?

Based on my own experience I do believe that there are a number of strong reasons why partnerships can be effective mechanisms to further participatory agricultural research and extension, including:

- to achieve a common purpose and/or to see a specific set of outcomes or results;
- to leverage institutional 'comparative advantages' in terms of skills, knowledge, capacities, resources; and
- to leverage resources, especially funds.

Though not usually cited as a 'rationale' for partnership, many organizations are often motivated to 'partner' with others in order to comply with 'soft' donor mandates to establish and/or maintain partnerships. And, I would certainly agree that this is often a factor which motivates one organization to partner with another (or many others).

My own observations on the principal rationale that motivates much of the development partnerships may be considered to be somewhat cynical. Though any one of the reasons cited above can be (and very often is) a valid and important reason for an organization (including a community group or a group of farmers) to enter into a partnership arrangement, I believe that the analysis of any potential partnership often begins and ends with a somewhat more calculated understanding of the 'benefits' which may be accrued from the partnership. Conclusions about the value of a potential partnership are often borne out of answers to questions such as "Will the partnership help us/my organization/me to accomplish important aims?", "Will we/I gain skills and knowledge that are directly beneficial to what we/I hope to achieve?", "Will the benefits out-weigh the costs of engaging in the partnership?"

In terms of farmer's rationale to consider partnerships with 'outsiders', they overwhelmingly do want to partner with others. From their own analysis, farmers can outline a number of reasons (benefits) to motivate them to seek and establish partnerships – to gain access to experience, knowledge and resources; to learn about new information or technology; to gain status among their peers; etc. Initially, farmers may be primarily motivated to partner for the potential 'benefits' they may gain. But over time, their attention and commitment to the partnership grows as they perceive the relationships that are built, as well as the benefits which they accrue. Farmers recognize the merits of relationships with 'outsiders' which are based on values that are important to them ("on their own terms"), including trust, honesty, empathy towards their situation, sincere recognition of their contributions to the process, and respect for their culture, among others (Killough, 2003). Most farmers also articulate the added value that they derive from the processes of 'accompaniment' in working with agricultural professionals, rather than pursuing agricultural experimentation or farmer-to-farmer processes in which the farmers/community members seek solutions to their problems on their own - without such 'outsider' contributions (Killough, 2003).

Discussion of several key elements of partnership for action research

In the section below, I have identified a number of key elements which have been important to my experiences related to the dynamics of 'action research' partnerships for participatory agricultural research and extension.

Trust

Though often not perceived as important by many professionals or organizations, the aspect of building and maintaining trust among partners – especially with farmers – can not be overemphasized. Possibly this is the most important element of a successful partnership; certainly, to the actors at the grassroots it is paramount. Trust is required not only to initiate activities, but to sustain and build momentum as the action research activities move through different stages of action, learning and ‘reaction’ (O’Hara, 2005). Trust is arguably hard to quantify and measure, but that obstacle should not be seen as license to down-play the essential contributions that derive from partnership relations which are built on the value of trust established between partners. As more partners are included in a partnership ‘mix’, trust among them is usually lower, especially if they are not ‘like-minded’ partners. Though, ironically, those are the circumstances which usually require higher levels of trust.

Transparency and accountability

These are elements to partnerships which have received a lot of attention and are themes that are relevant to many dimensions of a partnership, including decision-making, resource management, as well as motives and benefits received. They are also very closely related to the element of trust which underlies the entirety of a partnership – how much trust exists at the beginning? does that trust change over time, based on decisions made or resources allocated? are all partners open about the potential benefits that they may receive?

Farmers are keen to know what will be the outcomes; or, at least what might be expected to happen as the action research evolves. Even though results from an action research process may be unpredictable, transparency of that fact is a positive step to building and fostering trust – especially among community members. Transparency about how the information derived from the partnership will be used is also important. Information derived from action research processes can lead to a number of different outcomes – ‘academic’ research; changes in development practice; community learning; evaluative assessments (often extractive); and policy change, are but a few. Being clear with all partners about the intended use(s) of information and experience generated from the action research partnership is critical. Contributions from community members to action research processes should absolutely be acknowledged – as formally as relevant to the expected outcome.

One of the power dynamics of any action research partnership is the ‘golden rule’ – “s/he with the gold, rules”. Issues around transparency in partnerships often stem from concerns about resource use, and the power dynamics which result from one or few partners having a say in those decisions. Resources within a partnership can also often skew accountabilities toward those partners which manage the funds. The on-going experience of Prolinnova may be helpful to better understand how changes in resource allocation among partners within a partnership may favor different types of partner accountabilities. Prolinnova is testing the use of ‘local innovation support funds’ (LISF) as a mechanism to put resources directly into the hands of farmers or their organizations to support local innovation activities. Farmers may allocate the funds along priorities they set (within the general parameters of the action research partnership framework) and may even use the funds to ‘contract’ researchers or NGOs to provide certain research or capacity-building services to support their local innovation efforts (Waters-Bayer, *et al.*, 2005).

Personal contacts as ‘starting point’ for partnership

Based on my own experience, personal contacts are often an important impetus to spark partnerships, especially between heterogeneous organizations (GO-NGO, University-NGO) and multi-stakeholder platforms. This factor may probably be more important than we would prefer to acknowledge. It may also be one of the obstacles to more widely replicating partnerships, esp. between/among heterogeneous organizations. And, this does not appear to be solely a phenomenon among ‘professionals’, but is even an important determinant among community members who rely on a combination of personal contacts and trust as to how they themselves become involved in and seek others to become engaged in action research processes. Community members who are willing to ‘try something different’ are susceptible to potential embarrassment or scorn from their community peers (‘that’s silly’ ‘you’re wasting your time’ ‘nothing will come of that’). So, sharing that risk seems to be a bit easier with people who you personally know and trust (often relatives or neighbours) (Selener, *et al.*, 1996).

Risk-takers willing to work outside of institutional or societal constraints

As suggested above, participation in partnerships for action research involves a certain amount of risk – both for institutional partners, as well as for community people. Many partnerships begin with and are built around ‘risk-takers’ who are willing to do something different and to work outside of their own institutional or societal constraints. Again, this can be said to be true both for ‘professionals’ as well as for community members.

Recognition of and appreciation for ‘multiple perspectives, multiple realities’

Different partners bring to any partnership their own perceptions, understanding, analyses of the context, issues, opportunities, potential problems, as well as possible solutions. A successful action research partnership – especially one that aims to foster local capacity for endogenous development – needs to be built on the principle that these ‘multiple perspectives’ are each valid and real (O’Hara, 2005). Community viewpoints about ‘problems’ are no less valid than ‘outsider’ understandings of potential ‘solutions.’ While sometimes difficult to accept – especially among many ‘professionals,’ the recognition that these ‘multiple realities’ do exist and an appreciation that they must be considered is an important first step to a more meaningful type of interaction with community members. The bringing together of these ‘multiple realities’ through dialogue, joint analysis, reflective learning, and other processes and working toward a ‘joint reality’ crafted by several partners is where true learning and change can happen.

Importance of “reflection” processes

Any action research activity within a development setting obviously has learning as a primary objective. Processes for reflection on experiences gained – both successes as well as failures – are critical to action research partnerships which seek to learn, especially for learning among community partners.

Local leadership to sustain action

Leadership by community members to continue and sustain action research processes is critical to moving beyond initial successes and avoiding dependency on ‘outsider’ partners. Too often action research processes are initiated by ‘professionals’. Even in apparently farmer-led processes such as farmer innovators and farmer-to-farmer extension, initial impetus is given by ‘outsiders’ to things that farmers are already doing but maybe on a small scale or not systematically. Over time, as community members seek to sharpen multiple skills around action research, the emergence of local leadership to foster the continuation of action research into the future – even if the ‘outsiders’ are no longer engaged – is extremely important (Killough, 2005).

Implications for organizational change required to foster partnerships

Several of the points outlined in the previous section emphasize the importance of contributions – potential, perceived and real – by individuals to the establishment and sustenance of partnerships. However, within the agricultural development sector formal organizations remain to be important institutional mechanisms – except for farmers and their more informal grassroots organizations. But, if partnership arrangements are to spread and become more integrated into operational norms, organizations will be required to consider changes which will allow them to seek and foster partnerships (Lizares-Bodegon, *et al.*, 2002). A number of such changes are discussed below.

Organizational mandate or ‘space’

Most agricultural development organizations have not organized their programmes and activities around partnerships, but rather the opposite –they have pursued their aims and objectives on their own. So, as partnership arrangements have been encouraged in recent years, efforts to pursue partnerships have needed to be based on an overt mandate to do so; or, at least some tacit agreement within the organization of the (possible) benefits of such partnerships. Some organizations have been quick to embrace partnership-based programmes and activities (especially within the NGO sector), though many are still somewhat cautious of centering programme operations around partnerships. Within most agricultural development organizations the dialogue/debate around whether to partner or not, or under what circumstances to do so are centered on weighing the balance between the recognized benefits and costs of partnership. Though there is some recognition that the costs and benefits may be hidden, or at least initially unknown, and that other factors (e.g., resource capture, donor urging, potential to learn) suffice to urge the organization to initially partner with others.

Staff skills, knowledge and attitudes

As organizations embrace partnerships, individual staff must then make the partnership arrangements operational and functional. A number of critical staff skills, knowledge and attitudes are required to foster the modalities of partnership and to bring the approach into 'normal operations' of the organization (Killough and Espineli, 2005; Lizares-Bodegon, *et al.*, 2002). Some of these include:

- Skills – facilitation, inter-personal and social interaction, consultation, networking, dialogue and communication, conflict management and resolution.
- Knowledge – understanding of the dynamics (i.e., 'politics') of the partner organizations, and own organization; understanding of what motivates partners to be in the partnership (e.g., How will they benefit? Are they sincere?).
- Attitude – willing to make compromises/adjustments; patience to work through the necessary steps of a successful partnership (e.g., define objectives, set the agenda, etc.); willingness to share the successes and to bear the risks of failure.

Many of these knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) are not competency areas typically taught in educational institutions or universities, and are often not even recognized as 'valuable' within the staff development/HR systems of agricultural development organizations. Therefore, the challenge of how to identify and foster these KSAs remains an obstacle to building staff skill bases that can make more positive contributions to partnership initiatives (Espineli, *et al.*, 2003). For many NGOs, partnership skills among their staff are increasingly seen as an asset to their work, and as an important element in staff recruitment criteria and staff performance appraisal (Icatlo, N. Personal communication, 2006).

Accommodations or adjustments to organizational culture

The organizational culture of the different partners has a strong influence on the environment within which partnerships are initiated and grow. Understanding the similarities but especially the contrasts of the diverse organizational cultures of partners is not always recognized as an important dimension for successful partnerships. Though it may be difficult to expect changes to respective organizational cultures as a way to better support partnerships, recognition that there are differences, being sensitive to those differences, and deliberately searching for ways to 'accommodate' those differences is possible, and can be very effective. For example, many NGOs place a high value on the ethics of consultation and participation within their own operational norms, and wish to see that applied to the partnerships which they engage in. Partners that work within more traditional hierarchies of their formal institutions (e.g., government agencies, research institutes) may not place as much currency in this ethic. A realization on all sides that this is a potential source of conflict can in itself be a positive first step to discussing how to address differing expectations on this particular point. In the end, some form of accommodation by all partners about specific mechanisms for consultation and participatory decision-making will best lead to "a way forward" for the partnership – even if that accommodation might not be viewed in a positive light within any of the respective partner organizations.

Similarly, rural communities have their own set of norms for conducting business, related to consultation, deference to local leaders, decision-making processes, consensual agreement (or not), etc. These realities are typically different from the business norms to which the other partners are accustomed. Some degree of negotiation among the "outsider" partners about how to comfortably work within the farmer's norms may be required.

One concrete example of differing organizational cultures affecting partnerships is the issue of memoranda of agreements (MOAs or MOUs) as a prerequisite for partnership arrangements. Are these more formal instruments valuable to guide the relationship, or can they be viewed as more of a constraint? For partner organizations operating within large bureaucracies (government, research institutes, university), MOAs/MOUs are often required within their respective organizations to enable them to pursue partnership arrangements. For some partners, especially NGOs and civil society organizations, MOAs/MOUs may not be required, and may even be viewed with suspicion and disdain. Again, some degree of accommodation on both sides may be prudent – those partners who require the MOAs/MOUs should avoid trying to predict every possible scenario within the partnership and attempt to document prescribed actions within the framework of the MOA/MOU; similarly, the NGOs should view these documents as 'enabling instruments' to allow the partnership to move forward, and not be overly negative about the motives which make it a necessity.

Continuing issues and challenges to partnerships

Though partnerships are increasingly recognized as effective 'pathways' to realize greater results, a number of issues and challenges continue to face those interested to engage in partnerships. A number of these can be highlighted.

- Tension centered around the complementary but different partnership objectives of 1) undertaking processes to learn and to build capacity (among farmers, but also among partner staff), versus 2) achieving results, as often played out in the need to 'get it right' or to 'get the data.' This is an especially vital point as it relates to the importance that NGOs and (usually) farmers place on efforts to build capacity over time, so that farmers can sustain their innovation, experimentation and extension efforts into the future (Bhuktan, *et al.*, 1999). The same level of importance for this more long-term objective is not always shared by other agricultural development partners.
- Need for agricultural development actors to be able to move out of their own 'comfort zone' in order to seek value in linkages with other stakeholders, esp. those partners which come from different institutional types. The diversity of experience and new capacities to be gained from partnerships are increasingly being viewed by many professionals as positive. However, too often professionals may be hesitant to 'jump into' relationships with "other-minded" institutions (Waters-Bayer, *et al.*, 2007). Suspicions about the motives for partnership by the other partners may be both prevalent and strong. In the case of NGO partners, over time some of the suspicions arising from their analysis of the motives for partnerships by non-similar organizations has been reduced, and they are more eagerly seeking partnership, especially with research institutions.
- Differences in organizational culture, practices and norms among agricultural development institutions seeking to establish partnerships, esp. related to required protocols, hierarchies, etc. Another very important dimension to the organizational differences which may exist is whether or not the partners (existing or potential) share a common vision and worldview towards their work which underlies the partnership, including whether or not they have differing values and/or complementary missions. Fostering a common vision for a partnership is often an important first step in the formulation of the partnership, and will usually be more difficult when it is a multi-stakeholder partnership.
- Balance/tension between technocratic approaches (especially in areas such as agriculture and health, for example), versus more generalist, community development approaches – typically characterised as holistic, integrated, or multi-sectoral. When this issue arises, the tension is often strongly displayed between discipline-led researchers and NGO staff who may not place a high value on such approaches – either because they feel uncomfortable about the long-term prospective benefits of 'technical' solutions, or because they may not feel adequately competent with certain technical themes. Typically, this is less of an issue with community members, though that may be a reflection of their susceptibility to the 'agenda' being set by 'outsiders.' Similar dynamics between different actors around setting a priority, the process(es) to follow and expected results may also arise when managing multiple 'agendas' within the context of multi-disciplinary research activities (Stern, *et al.*, 2007).
- Different expectations among partners of the benefits and challenges of partnership arrangements, and the overall 'cost-benefit' of these relationships. Examples of this, include:
 - Farmers becoming frustrated and no longer wishing to partner/cooperate with local government representatives because they perceive that the officials are 'corrupt', 'inefficient' or 'lazy'.
 - NGO staff 'losing interest' in partnership arrangements with research partners because they perceive that the researchers are "only interested in collecting data" and don't share their broader developmental vision of the actions research process.
 - Frustration on the part of government staff or researchers (especially those coming from more hierarchical institutions) concerning the focus that NGOs place on consultation, processes, and participation within partnership dynamics and the action research process.

- As discussed earlier in the paper, the question of motive(s) of each partner to seek and engage in partnerships and the ‘cost-benefit’ analysis that each partner considers of whether or not to (1) engage in, and (2) sustain a partnership remains to be a challenge to many organizations. Are the partners – especially those new to partnership arrangements - able to accurately estimate those costs and benefits? Do the motives to partner tend to be more driven by the positive rationale for partnership, such as seeking comparative advantage/synergy; or more towards the less benign motives, such as opportunism or ‘facipulation’?
- Still grappling with standards and processes to gauge the value of partnership arrangements for action research. Do the benefits make up for the costs involved? If so, is it true for all partners, or do some partners gain bigger benefits than others? Often the M&E and/or assessment processes that are used tend to focus on the process and results of the action research activities and outcomes, and not so much on the uni-lateral and multi-lateral dimensions – good and not so good - of the partnerships, per se.

Conclusion

Partnerships for action research among farmers and formal agricultural research institutions have become more prevalent and are receiving much more attention as mechanisms to drive agricultural innovation and learning. However, in most contexts these partnerships are often very localized and limited in scope, often in spite of considerable investments of time, effort and resources. To date, these experiences have not yet yielded widespread examples of how partnership approaches can become an integral and systemic approach to “doing business” by the formal agricultural research and development sector.

Though some NGOs working at the grassroots may be slow to open-up to partnership arrangements with formal research institutions and may prefer to shun such linkages, many more are seeing the value of action research which involves other stakeholders. Also, as these experiences are seen to yield positive results, many civil society organizations and NGOs are eager to integrate grassroots-based action research experiences into higher-level linkages – for policy advocacy and change, to suggest institutional reform, and to influence donor mandates. When conducted with commitment and integrity on the part of the ‘outsider’ partners, farmers have drawn inspiration and strength from partnership arrangements which have allowed them to learn from others while at the same time sharing their experiences more widely.

Since the Farmer First workshop in 1987, we have certainly made tremendous progress to better understand, promote and institutionalize farmer-first approaches into the concepts, practices, and institutional actions of agricultural research and development institutions. We should also be optimistic for the future as we continue to support farmer-first experiences.

Americana musician Steve Earle once said, “What do you do when you realize your dream?....You get a new dream.”

As we come together for this Farmer First Revisited workshop, we may want to think that it’s time to “get a new dream” – a new focus to our work. But, I would argue that we’ve not yet realized our farmer-first dream. Much work remains to be done; partnerships, I believe, are a powerful mechanism to realize much of the work that lies ahead.

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