

Learning together in an informal network

An open network based on informal exchanges among its affiliates produces guidelines for donors

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Within the donor community, different approaches to agricultural extension had led to some confrontation in the past. The T&V (Training and Visit) system advocated by the World Bank and adopted by around 30 African countries has been criticised by other donors who nevertheless failed to propose equally well-developed alternatives. Now, it is widely recognised that the confrontation among donors negatively affects their field operations. But it's the farming families and their countries in the South who pay a heavy price for loss in efficiency of development assistance.

A group of donors including the World Bank therefore suggested an informal conference of donors to address the problem of support for agricultural extension systems in Africa. Swiss Development Co-operation volunteered to host and to facilitate the meeting. In July 1995 the first "Informal Consultation on International Support for Agricultural Extension Systems in Sub-saharan Africa" took place in Neuchâtel (Switzerland). Ever since the group met again once a year. What is it that motivates representatives of donor agencies and universities of 10 European countries and the World Bank to participate in an engaged workshop on efficient and effective agricultural extension and its financing?

The advantage of informality

Whenever you bring representatives of institutions together in a formal way they are bound to defend the view of their organisation. This means that the real discussions regarding the issues at stake will take place during the breaks, at informal gatherings or in the evening. The ingenious move for bringing the discussion to the plenary

consisted in declaring the whole meeting as an informal consultation. Nobody's ideology was being questioned and no binding decisions would be taken. This move took away a great deal of tensions and allowed the participants to speak out and to share their personal, unofficial opinion. If a group wants to be creative it needs a trustful environment to allow the sharing of personal opinions.

A network needs a shared interest

At the end of the first meeting, after the various donors had the opportunity to explain their point of view, it was felt that it might be a good thing to stay in contact. However, it took three years and two rather painful and costly experiences before the donors realised that they in fact had a common interest.

The first and almost natural move of the donors was to invite stakeholders (partners) from the south to their meetings. So representatives of governments, of extension services and of NGOs as well were invited. After two attempts the donors realised that the interest of the stakeholders from the South was mainly to get funds and to tap sources of financing, which evidently wasn't the interest of the donors. They wanted to share their experience, to co-ordinate their activities and to get a common understanding how to best use the available funds. So they realised that it would be preferable to discuss their issues of interest among donors only.

A network needs some kind of structure and a neutral facilitation

The chosen informality meant also to avoid a more rigid form of structure like having a secretariat. There were

several proposals to formalise the structure and once and again it was discarded. A formal secretariat would mean to pay the staff, to create a board, to agree on a shared funding. But even though a co-ordinated approach is a stated goal the affiliated donors still do have their preferences and none of the bigger agencies trusted the others completely. So it was decided to accept the SDC offer for maintaining a minimal structure and to facilitate both the ongoing activities and the annual meeting.

Success factor influence instead of doctrine

As a result of their discussions within the network the group produced guidelines called common frameworks (CF). They were acceptable to the donors as a contribution to their own internal considerations. On one hand the guidelines were a product of the informal consultations and on the other hand it filled a gap since the donors themselves had no better ideas. The result was that many of the ideas created by the NI affiliates were finally accepted by the donors. If the various CF had to pass the official agreement of the donors none of them could have been published by now. The next ingenious move consisted in the fact that the NI didn't claim a copy right for their publications. Donors' staff, consultants and even teachers at universities felt free to copy parts of the guidelines and use them in their own presentations. So they themselves adopted the ideas and spread them convincingly among their public.

Success factor personal commitment

The fact that there was no formal structure nobody was in danger to lose his/her job. It is a common phenomenon in the development business that structures tend to get more and more formal. Starting a secretariat would mean hiring staff, and if it is in the South provide an office with infrastructure. When everything is installed it is hard to get rid of it again, mostly because staff members want to keep their job.

The third ingenious decision was: the NI only lasts as long as the affiliates feel committed to it. Each affiliate

is accountable to his/her headquarters and has to convince them that the meeting is worth the investment. The annual meeting needs an affiliate who volunteers to host and to organise the meeting. All participants at the meeting pay their own travel expenses and the expenses of those resource persons they invite. It is also the interested donor who pays for the writing, the translation and the printing of the guidelines. If there is no host, there is no meeting; affiliates who can't convince their superiors of the usefulness of their participation stay home; if no donor is willing to pay for the elaboration of a planned product, there is no product. So, either the affiliates continue to be committed or the NI ceases to exist.

The major lessons learnt

- If you want to discuss issues among representatives of organisations make it informal.
- Make sure that the interest of the participants is of the same kind.
- The chosen structure has to reflect both the way of functioning as the planned lifetime of the network
- Guidelines are most attractive if they offer useful answers to immediate topics and if their adoption is voluntary.
- Hot money is the best indicator for personal commitment. Affiliates can convince superiors for investment only if they consider the network to be useful.

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