Emerging lessons about conducting action-research in partnership with farmers and other stakeholders

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Top-down approaches to innovation development are still frequent or even dominant in many circles. Even after several decades, the shift away from such approaches is far from complete and has not happened without resistances. The first steps, up to introducing a fair degree of farmer participation in the research process, have been relatively painless because researchers keep a fair degree of control over the research process. The subsequent steps leading to the developing of full-fledged partnerships have been much more difficult, because researchers are required to reassess thoroughly many conventional research methodologies and to scrutinize deeply held individual and institutional values and mechanisms about decision-making affecting the core of the research process.

Understanding better such difficulties is the focus of this article. Drawing from a pool of 10 projects conducted by researchers working with farmers in a variety of contexts over the past decade, it provides insights and lessons about some major issues and outlines specific challenges for the researchers involved in action-research in partnership.

1. The case studies

This paper is based on an investigation developed within the context of a research project conducted by CIRAD in 2005-2007 called CIROP (Construction of Innovation and ROle of Partnership). Two interrelated key questions are the focus of CIROP: what types of partnerships are required to strengthen the capacity of rural societies to innovate? Which methods derived from Action Research (AR) are required to do so? CIROP focuses on two research objects: innovation processes and partnerships. CIROP intervened directly in two on-going AR projects in West and Central Africa. It also developed a comparative synthesis of 10 research projects in which local actors were involved to different degrees and in different ways in the conception of innovations. Issues addressed were highly diverse. They ranged from focused technical interventions (plant breeding for Sorghum and Durum wheat, dissemination of vegetative banana material, conservation agriculture) to strengthening of the adaptive capacity of farming systems to drought, supporting decision-making at the farm level or structuring the quality cocoa supply-chain, to territorial development and creation of scenarios for smallholder agriculture of the future. Four of these 10 experiences are still on-going. In all cases, research and farmers' organizations were the main stakeholders involved. In half the cases, they are being joined by extension services. Other types of stakeholder involved in were agro-industry, education, land use planning agency, NGOs. While diverse, these cases do not constitute a representative sample of the diversity of existing research projects conducted in partnership. Selection biases include among others an over-representation of research-led projects, and the priority given to the relationships between research and farmers.

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2. Selected lessons learnt from the case studies' analysis

Encounters among key individuals and break-ups

In most case studies, research initiated the participatory process by proposing to its would-be partners to help them solve problems they faced (supply-driven process). In other cases, the non-research partners took the initiative and contacted research as a valuable contributor to solving a previously identified problem or constraint (demand-driven process). Only in one case did supply and demand coincide simultaneously at a given time.

All case studies show that rather than institutions, it is individuals with specific skills and historical trajectories who initiated the encounter process. Institutions did play a role by granting such individuals a certain degree of freedom, or by giving them an actual mandate for "doing things differently" in the best cases. But in several cases, it was up to the individuals themselves to create the space they needed to operate.

In summary, our case studies illustrate the key role played by individual researchers who embark on a long-term professional trajectory, searching for novel ways to conduct research. This eventually leads them to work closely with stakeholders they do not necessarily know in advance. In doing so, they usually can count on the discrete benevolence of their institutions. They also reveal to farmers during the course of action a new, unusual face of research and of themselves as individuals. This encounter creates in turn favourable conditions for engaging into fruitful dialogue and negotiating objectives and modalities for joint work. Much the same analysis applies to other stakeholders as they work with research. The story does not end with the encounter. Other challenges soon follow suit, such as how to mobilize the resources necessary for the implementation of joint activities.

How research partners in this journey, and particularly farmers, reacted to these novel approaches was variable and actually evolved over time. Some watched intently without strong involvement, others started by watching "over the hedge" the behaviour of these unconventional researchers before involving themselves actively. Some were quite ready to take over responsibilities previously assumed routinely by Research but without necessarily accepting the integrality of what researchers wanted them to do. In the cases where farmers took the initiative, their requirements and expectations vis-à-vis research were clearer ("we are the ones who give the criteria on what we want to do research on"). This led to an immediate definition of terms of reference for the interaction farmers-researchers. Things played out quite differently in Equator where the researcher played the role of a mediator between the agro-industry and the farmers' organizations.

Non-lineal pathways of partnership projects

There is nothing automatic in the actual trajectory of the projects, which tend to follow non-lineal, highly unpredictable pathways for a number of reasons.

For one, most projects were the result of highly personalized interactions and negotiations at the local level, with only limited efforts made at scaling up and institutionalising the corresponding agreements and approaches. Under such circumstances, changing project course tends to happen matter-of-factly, as soon as the corresponding need is perceived and agreed-upon. In one case, farmers decided to put an emphasis on legislation problems related to seed certification, and research followed. In other cases, stark differences in the core interests of the various participants both at the individual and institutional level emerged over time, modifying the initial consensus and agreement on objectives and activities. Another reason for non-linearity has to do with the usually

In conclusion, non-linearity and unpredictability appear to be key intrinsic features of multi-stakeholder projects. Providing or negotiating enough time for the corresponding adjustments are critical. Unfortunately, such much-needed adjustments do not necessarily occur smoothly and gradually but rather in crisis mode and at unexpected times. Crises may produce negative consequences at times but they can also provide the opportunity to address issues not properly tackled in earlier stages of the projects. When properly managed, crises also allow appropriation of the project by the various partners. Thus it is wise to devise from the start mechanisms allowing an early warning system and for their adequate management once they emerge, in order to minimize collateral damage.

weak existing knowledge researchers possess about prevailing or evolving social interactions and power relationships among stakeholders. The unequal ability (at times willingness) of the various participants of a multiple stakeholder project to follow agreed-upon rules for project operation may also play a key role.

Diversity of set-ups and governance mechanisms

Tasks and responsibilities are distributed among participating stakeholders at two distinct levels: operational set-ups and governance mechanisms.

The operational set-ups are designed whenever stakeholders jointly decide to carry out an agreed-upon activity, with the willingness to "do it together", and whether or not clear "rules of the game" are formalized between them. Our case studies illustrate a diversity of operational set-ups designed for conducting diagnosis, monitoring and evaluation, training courses, exchanges and visits, developing groups, assessing results, experimenting on-station or on-farm, planning activities, etc. The shift towards co-piloting of these set-ups is strong. Recurring questions pop up in the debates taking place during joint planning sessions, such as "up to what point such or such activity must be implemented by research or by its partners?" However, the actual impact of co-piloting remains unclear: in what form and to what degree does it contribute to strengthening the partnership spirit, to the quality of the problem-solving solutions and to the generation of new knowledge?

In terms of governance, most case studies did not develop specific mechanisms for deciding jointly on strategic project orientations or for solving peacefully conflicts among stakeholders. Project coordinators tended to be much more accountable to their own hierarchy rather than to other stakeholders. The case studies illustrate however the vital importance of formalizing governance mechanisms and rules, as they bring an added capacity to partnerships to solve problems jointly over the medium- to long-term. Agreed-upon governance rules tend to evolve dynamically during the project life as they strive to reflect the accumulated learning and the evolving power relationships among stakeholders. Thus rules can be considered as much as a product than a starting point of an effective AR process.

Involving farmers and their organizations

Effective involvement of all stakeholders is a crucial issue in any partnership process. Indeed, the identification of objectives and set-ups, the lessons and conclusions drawn from the experiences depend heavily on the actual capacities of each partner to carry out agreed-upon activities and to negotiate with other stakeholders. Our case studies illustrate how difficult it is to move away from token participation and ensure a strong, balanced involvement of all the participants, and especially of the farmers.

Diversity and difficulties related to farmers' participation

Involvement of farmers' organizations depends heavily on the genesis of the project. As research took the initiative in seven out of our ten cases, strong farmer participation was more difficult to achieve. Farmers' organizations played a key role throughout the process, including in driving it. The size of farmers' organizations appears less important than its capacity to organize its activities and to establish relationships with others stakeholders. Poor small-scale farmers' organizations tend to lack adequate financial resources, limiting the ability of their representatives to participate in events or to carry out activities and limiting their motivation to involve themselves intensively throughout the process. There are also competing requirements for investing time in the organization's activities vs. at the farm level.

Representativeness and legitimacy

When farmers' organizations are absent, the representativeness of farmers in a partnership is an issue other stakeholders need to take especially into account. When farmers' organizations are involved, farmers' selection may be the result of a mostly internal process or more often, of an interaction with other stakeholders. Due to their large experience of interacting with the outside world, elected representatives of farmers' organizations have political legitimacy in the eyes of their fellow-farmers, and thus are often designed to represent their organizations in multi-stakeholder AR projects. But technical skills of farmers are key to ensure that innovation and new knowledge are produced, especially when operational set-ups involve a strong component of farmer-managed experimentation. Altogether, the

role of personal characteristics and social status, the willingness to participate, the technical and inter-personal skills (facilitating a meeting, reaching consensus), and the legitimacy inside the farmers' world are more important than representativeness per se.

Building trust and reaching clear commitments requires time

Relationships between stakeholders

The capacity to establish adequate relationships among the respective worlds of the farmers, the technicians and the researchers is yet another critical issue. All the case studies insist on the importance of trust and effective communication among farmers, technicians and researchers, and propose different ways of dealing with it. But it takes time to build trust. In one example, a full one year period was needed to establish trust between technicians and farmers and to start working on the topics of real interest to farmers. There is usually a need to develop activities specifically geared at allowing stakeholders to know each other and to build a common language (such as field visits, training events, etc.).

Proper communication among stakeholders within a partnership is also critical. Managed poorly, it may become a source of frustration to the participants. In most case studies, large meetings were organized at key moments of the project life to discuss, validate and disseminate results. Information dissemination strategies should make sure they reach beyond those individuals who take part directly in project activities, and involve institutional decision-makers.

Nature of the commitments

The nature of the commitments and responsibilities of each stakeholder within the partnership is also important. Some commitments are strategic (e.g. quality management in cocoa production through producing and marketing adequate varieties), others are more tactical or operational (e.g. management of field trials). Some are global and influence the whole process (such as defining the objectives and the methodology) while others are partial and only involve a subset of stakeholders. None of the 10 case studies had however any procedures in place for monitoring the various stakeholders' commitments and for enforcing sanctions when potentially dangerous deviations were observed. Formalizing commitments is a different issue than establishing and keeping them. While some experienced farmers' organizations may trust written agreements and formal committees, others may prefer a commitment expressed in a special place or in front of respected moral authority.

Main types of results achieved in partnership mode

Three types of results will be examined in turn: knowledge generation, learning processes and empowerment, problem solving.

Knowledge generation

Unsurprisingly, knowledge was produced on the biophysical processes or on the farming systems related closely to the specific topics addressed in each project (such as assessments of the supply-chain of the plantain banana and on the process of dissemination of new seeds). Original knowledge was also produced on the innovation process and on the strategies of the different stakeholders.

All cases also generated routinely research information useful for the stakeholders during the course of the participatory process. This lies in contrast to what happens for purely scientific products targeted for the scientific community (communications at congresses, articles undergoing a peer review system). But production of academically-validated knowledge is relatively scarce compared to what is observed in conventional research. Furthermore, it tends to occur after the end of the participatory process (for instance, the first scientific communication about "La Reunion Island" took place 2 years after the end of the project, and the first scientific article 5 years after).

Learning processes and empowerment

Learning is a key product of partnership processes. Participants build knowledge about new technologies, about organizational issues, about designing new projects, or about developing capacities to negotiate with others stakeholders. The learning process is usually complex, as it is embedded in different activities mixing (i) access to knowledge and know-how through classical trainings, (ii) strengthening of

capacities during all the process, (iii) development of skills by implementing acquired knowledge and capacities in action. While the first two are present in all case studies, the last one occurred only in few cases. Defining and quantifying precisely the nature of the diverse learning processes taking place remains difficult: it would require identifying a set of unambiguous criteria and assessing the corresponding impacts in and outside the group of participants.

Problem solving

Last but not least, results relate to solving problems in the form of technical, organizational and institutional innovations. In one case the main result is a new method for providing farm management advice with the assistance of a public institution. In other cases, the innovation was more of an institutional nature (definition of a "contract for territory development" between farmers and the ministry of agriculture or creation of a regional institution for promoting conservation agriculture).

All the case studies show however that the problem initially identified by the stakeholders is never completely solved at the end of the project, even though relevant results have been achieved. Most of the time, results are partial because of a rather imprecise or overly ambitious definition of objectives to be achieved at the beginning of the participatory process. The objectives may also evolve all along the project because of an evolution both of the problem and the stakeholders. Fortunately, the process of negotiation and research of new solutions tends to continue even after the formal presentation of the conclusions of the participatory process to the stakeholders.

3. Conclusions, challenges & perspectives for research

Our ten case studies confirm that researchers and actors who engage in collaborative processes have distinct characteristics and professional trajectories, which lead them away from mainstream or conventional approaches typically used within the institutions they belong to. In doing so, researchers discover that meaningful partnerships actually able to renew the way research is conducted require real partners willing to work and learn together, despite their eventual respective weaknesses at the start of the process. This emphasizes the importance of dedicating enough time and efforts to the initial stages, during which the foundations of the partnership are laid down.

Our study also stresses the need to invest more thinking into a number of areas essential for improved performance of partnerships such as acquiring facilitation and negotiation skills, devising mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution, building of common and realistic rules, etc. Engaging in such processes, especially when research is the one that takes the initiative of a partnership process, leads to the emergence of new roles and functions for researchers, such as those of facilitators, communicators, negotiators and mediators, and also of catalysers of unpredictable and non-lineal innovation processes. It appears however difficult to allocate enough time to these functions without diverting it from the time required for generating new knowledge and capitalizing it in forms acceptable to the academic world. A solution could be to share these functions more equally among stakeholders but striking the correct balance remains elusive.

As roles evolve over time in any live partnership process, the balance among partners in steering and coordinating the project has to be readjusted periodically to take into account the often-claimed willingness of researchers to contribute to the gradual autonomy and empowerment of their weakest partners, often times farmers and their organizations. This leads to the critical reassessment by research on the level of control it must and can share over the partnership process with other actors. It should not fearg in doing so that this will automatically translate in a failure to produce legitimate, useful science and knowledge. This also relates to how the various stakeholders commit themselves to the partnership rules and work plans, and whether formalizing such commitments is really pertinent (with a mechanism providing both sanctions and incentives).

The uncertainties about achievable results oblige researchers to negotiate carefully their place and status within their institutions in order to avoid complete marginalization and loss of status, due to the perception by mainstream researchers that partnership type

work lacks scientific legitimacy. Questions and challenges abound in this respect. For example, how may researchers accept to take the back stage in order to contribute better to the empowerment of their weaker partners? How can they find the time necessary for more self-critical assessment of what they do when pressure to deliver ambitious results and impacts in decreasing time frames is mounting? How can researchers pursue the necessary systematization of results and lessons obtained within the context of partnership processes, and with whom?

Ideally, a solution would be to somehow find a way of re-adjusting institutional signals and incentives and investing significant efforts to provide adequate training and learning (formally and by doing) to many researchers and also to some institutional decision-makers on the principles, approaches and practices of Action-Research in Partnership. Luckily these challenges are addressed already by more and more researchers respective.