



Encouraging Effective R&D Partnerships: Lessons Learned from the Indian Experience



Introduction

Partnerships are increasingly recognised by donors and policy makers as viable strategy for achieving effective and efficient agricultural and natural resource management (NRM) research and development. The potential advantage of partnerships is clear: the pooling of diverse experiences, capabilities and interests can offer a synergistic response to the complex challenges that face agricultural researchers and NRM specialists.

An ideal partnership can be defined as:

...a dynamic relationship among diverse actors, based on mutually agreed objectives, pursued through a shared understanding of the most rational division of labour based on the respective comparative advantages of each partner. Partnership encompasses mutual influence, with a careful balance between synergy and respective autonomy, which incorporates mutual respect, equal participation in decision making, mutual accountability and transparency.

Brinkerhoff (2002)

In practice, however, such ideal partnerships are seldom, if ever, found. Yet the successful partnerships examined in this work were characterised by a common set of fundamental principles (Box 1). Despite strong indications of the value of partnerships in agricultural R&D, in practice the effectiveness of the approach varies – a reflection of the difficulties inherent in melding the efforts of diverse groups with dissimilar goals, objectives, values and organisational cultures.

Background

The Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Natural Resource Management Division (ICAR–NRM), in partnership with the UK's Department for International Development, Natural Resource Systems Programme (DFID–NRSP), previously funded pilot research projects that tested new institutional approaches to research (this work took place at the ICAR Research Complex for the Eastern Region (RCER), Patna). During a 2004 workshop¹ that examined the findings of one of these pilot projects, participants identified an opportunity to validate the utility of the partnership approach more widely by comparing experiences and lessons learned across innovative projects and programmes in India.

In late 2005, ICAR–NRM and DFID–NRSP agreed to co-sponsor a four-day workshop in Delhi, *Learning from*

Box 1. Basic principles underpinning effective partnerships

Partnerships are born of the understanding that more can be achieved jointly than separately. Efficient, effective and enduring partnerships among public- and private-sector organisations share some common traits:

- Partners anticipate and encourage the expression of differences in perspectives and approaches. Success often comes from exploring and learning from these differences.
- Partners recognise and embrace the relative strengths of each partner, and they strive to earn one another's trust as they join forces to achieve common goals.
- Similarly, they seek to recognise the roles and responsibilities of each partner, which builds respect for each other's strengths and provides each partner with a sense of belonging and of adding value.
- Successful partnerships rest on a shared vision that is used to forge a common understanding of the goals and objectives of the alliance.
- Successful partnerships benefit all partners. If partner organisations are not comfortable with potential benefits, the partnership will not last long.
- Effective R&D partnerships focus on relevant issues, and the probability of success rises when research priorities are derived from, indeed driven by, the full participation of local community residents.
- Viable, longer-term partnerships are continuously evaluated against 'revealed' community-driven priorities, and are sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities.

Institutional Change, that involved the analysis and synthesis of four case study projects selected as examples of innovative, interdisciplinary, multi-partner research (see Boxes 2–5). The workshop asked a deceptively simple question: **What rules, habits and conventions have to be changed to enable effective and efficient partnerships?**

A modified innovation history method was used in the workshop to guide discussions by participants – nearly all of whom were agricultural R&D practitioners (Douthwaite et al., 2006). The innovation history methodology (Douthwaite and Ashby, 2005) enables stakeholders in an innovative process to record and reflect on the reality of that process.

¹ *Realising Potential: Livelihoods, Poverty and Governance*, 2–3 August 2004, New Delhi.

Box 2. Case study: Integrated management of land and water resources for enhancing productivity and Improved livelihoods through improved crop and soil management (two merged projects)

Partners: ICAR Research Complex for Eastern Region, Patna; Rothamsted Research, UK; Cirrus Management Services, Ltd., Bangalore

Interventions: Development of local institutional arrangements that enable rural men and women, specifically the poor, to improve their livelihoods including delivery of improved rural services and development of new arrangements for the management of land and water

Location: Patna, Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh

Key features: ICAR researchers and international scientists working in a full partnership with a private-sector company specialising in community development. The project gave the community development specialists the space to innovate their own methods for meeting goals, rather than being treated as sub-contractors that had to work in ways prescribed by ICAR or international partners.

The act of preparing the history stimulates discussion, thinking and learning among participants, and results in information outputs that enable the sharing of findings more widely. The method represents a relatively quick and economic way of articulating and spreading the lessons from innovative experiences.

This brief describes the main lessons drawn from the workshop and makes recommendations that should be considered and addressed by policy makers, donors and senior research managers interested in developing and implementing effective R&D partnerships.

Key lessons and recommendations

• **Time.** A common experience from the case studies is that much more time is needed to create fully functioning research partnerships than is required to establish conventional research projects. Time is required to obtain full buy-in to shared goals and objectives, to build trust and understanding among partners, and to reach the point where the partnership is actually delivering on its promises.

Thus, a central recommendation is that donors and partners allow at least one to two years before expecting R&D partnerships to begin to deliver results and achieve impact. Moreover, where partnerships already exist it may be more efficient and effective to invest in those, rather than establishing new ventures, in order to leverage previous investments.

• **Flexibility.** Successful partnerships are usually very dynamic relationships characterised by open-ended planning, responsive-ness to changing needs, and flexible financial management.

Policy makers thus need to ensure that management systems provide sufficient flexibility to allow new partners to join over time and others to leave once it is clear that their role has changed or been fulfilled.

• **Leadership.** Traditional, centralised, command-and-control governance structures are not effective for managing true partnerships. Thriving partnerships usually embrace the principle of subsidiarity and decentralised decision making, avoiding the rigidity that can come with undue centralisation of authority. Indeed, successful partnerships are always characterised by vibrant leadership, and it is not unusual to see leadership pass from those who envision and establish a partnership to others who can, for whatever reason, more effectively carry it forward.

Policy makers need to create an environment that allows, indeed encourages, the delegation of both responsibility and authority to those most closely involved in carrying out the work. This can be done using broad accountability frameworks that monitor impacts and ensure the delivery of results.

• **Complementarity and comparative advantage.** The strongest partnerships are those that explicitly recognise and build on the strengths of the partners, properly acknowledging (both formally and informally) the contributions of each. They also recognise that the capacity of partner organisations and the needs of a partnership normally evolve and change over time.

Box 3. Case study: Improved livelihoods in watersheds through a consortium approach

Partners: International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), Patancheru; District Water Management Agency; Central Research Institute for Dryland Agriculture (CRIDA), Hyderabad; M. Venkatarngiya Foundation (MVF), Secunderabad; National Remote Sensing Agency (NRSA), Hyderabad; and farmers in Kothapally, through the watershed association, watershed committees, user groups and self-help groups

Interventions: Increased agricultural productivity; improved water availability; employment generation; and reduced soil erosion

Location: Andhra Pradesh

Key features: The novel consortium approach required ICRISAT to decentralise the administrative functions needed to support multi-stakeholder projects in different, widely spread, locations.

Box 4. Case study: The Rice–Wheat Consortium

Partners: The International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and ICRISAT; ICAR; private-sector input and service providers, agricultural machinery manufacturers, and NGOs

Interventions: Research on rice–wheat systems; participatory needs assessment; participatory validation and refinement of technologies; technology dissemination

Location: Indo-Gangetic Plains, including Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan

Key features: An assessment of achievements on the Indo-Gangetic Plains was used to formulate a consortium research and technology development strategy that included the private sector, international exposure and learning lessons from others. Partnering arrangements have evolved. Initially, efforts focused on working with lead farmers at the field level. The consortium now works increasingly with community-level institutions in addition to lead farmers.

Partnerships require internal monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that allow them to respond effectively to changing needs and opportunities. Responsibility and authority for implementing this continuing activity should be vested with project leaders, and be seen as complementary to formal mid-term and end-of-project monitoring and evaluation activities.

• **Livelihoods.** The case studies show that, where partnership activities sought to deliver livelihood benefits, success was improved by using techniques that brought members of the local community, including the poorest and most socially disadvantaged, into the planning and implementation of activities. Doing so enabled researchers to understand true community-level development priorities and greatly enhanced a sense of ownership by local residents.

Project leaders should be formally encouraged to seek innovative ways of empowering local communities. The work of researchers and development specialists from outside the community is all too often guided by predetermined or assumed development priorities, and such deterministic community development activities should be avoided.

• **Public–private partnerships.** There are often important differences between the organisational cultures of public and private institutions – differences that can lead to significant friction and conflict within public–private partnerships. Private organisations, whether non-profit or for-profit, tend to be more nimble and adaptive. Successful

partnerships, however, treat these differences as a source of strength, and build on them.

Policy makers need to sanction – in fact, actively promote – a much higher degree of interdependence, interaction and influence between and among diverse partners.

• **Transparency.** Successful partnerships are characterised by transparency in planning, decision making and financial management. Achieving true transparency is not easy. It requires a shared understanding and acceptance that transparency benefits everyone, and is closely linked to institutional changes aimed at building trust, dynamic leadership, and flexibility.

The policies, rules and regulations that govern partnerships need to be designed in ways that ensure transparency. Appropriate incentives (and disincentives) aimed at promoting transparency must be put in place.

• **Evaluation.** R&D partnerships need to be evaluated differently than traditional research projects. Conventional frameworks for evaluating individual performance are generally not compatible with accurately assessing contributions within a partnership. Beyond that, the effectiveness of partnerships themselves needs to be evaluated.

Policy makers need to ensure that the costs and benefits of delivering research through partnerships are appropriately quantified and documented. This will require putting new mechanisms in place specifically to gauge partnership performance. They also need to ensure that the efforts of individuals involved in partnerships do not go unnoticed and unrewarded. This will likely mean changing (or augmenting) the traditional criteria by which the contributions of individual scientists are judged.

Box 5. Case study: Community development in Gujarat

Partners: Aga Khan Rural Support Project (AKRSP); Community Group (GVM) Bank; Farmers Federation; Milk Union; state departments dealing with agriculture, soil and water conservation, irrigation and forestry

Interventions: Joint forest management; soil and water conservation and agro-forestry; establishment of self-help groups; biogas; irrigation schemes; input supply and output marketing; dairy and micro-enterprise development

Location: Gujarat

Key features: Long-term partnership with a community in which the community went from being poorly organised and dependent on the (Aga Khan Rural Support Project (AKRSP) to being well organized and independent.

The way forward

Improving on the past performance of agricultural R&D partnerships requires continuous learning from partnership experiences. This in turn requires dedicating resources to gathering, documenting and sharing experiences and lessons learned, as well as the use of appropriate methods for doing so. This is what motivated the November 2005 workshop, *Learning from Institutional Change*.

In this Brief, a number of key lessons from the four successful Indian case study partnerships that served as the focus of that workshop have been highlighted. These partnerships demonstrate the advantages and synergies that can come from pooling of diverse experiences, capabilities and interests. Few examples of such successes in India are to be found in projects or programmes that are directly funded by the Government of India. While the workshop did not fully examine the reasons for this, the lessons and experiences drawn from the case studies point to recommendations that should be considered by policy makers, donors and senior research managers if effective agricultural R&D partnerships are to be encouraged.



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Acknowledgements

The contributions of participants in each of the phases of the workshop are gratefully recognised. This Brief draws directly on the materials prepared by participants during the workshop. Funding for this workshop was provided by the UK Department for International Development, Natural Resource System Programmes (DFID–NRSP) through project PD140 led by John Gaunt (GY Associates Ltd, Harpenden, UK). The project and workshop were co-sponsored by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Natural Resource Management Division (ICAR–NRM). Alok K. Sikka (ICAR Research Complex for the Eastern Region (RCER), Patna, Bihar) and Rasheed V. Sulaiman, National Centre for Agricultural Economics and Policy Research (NCAP) were partners in implementing the project. Invaluable support in the design of the workshop approach and in facilitation was provided by John Best (International and Rural Development Department, The University of Reading, Reading, UK), Boru Douthwaite (International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Cali, Colombia) and Tiff Harris (Green Ink, Kenya). We gratefully recognise the support provided by NCAP for publication and distribution of this policy brief and the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) for supporting the contributions of Boru Douthwaite.

This document is an output from a project funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

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