The ARD Learning Cycle

1 Introduction

However you use the ICRA ARD information resources, the challenge for you will be to find a way to integrate them with a broader process of action learning with your partners in rural innovation.

We see this action learning process as consisting of two integrated cycles: an "action cycle" and a "learning cycle".

The action cycle consists of three stages:

➢ Forming partnerships with other organizations or individuals who share with you a common "development challenge" - a complex development problem or opportunity;

➢ Achieving a common understanding of this challenge - synthesizing the perspectives of different stakeholders, understanding the wider context of the challenge, defining what changes you want to see in the "system";

➢ Screening and evaluating the different options or activities carried out for technology improvement, improved services to rural people, policy and institutional change that further enable innovation and the improvement of rural livelihoods.

The learning cycle also consists of three stages:

➢ Planning - where you and your partners collectively decide what to do and how to go about it;

➢ Doing - where you collectively or individually implement the agreed activities; and

➢ Reflecting - where you collectively evaluate what you have done, how effective this has been, and how to further improve your effectiveness in the future

We see these as cycles of iterative stages, rather than as a linear process, because all development practitioners are already involved in these processes, and because the different stages are not clearly separated but iterative. At any stage, it may be necessary to form new partnerships; as options are evaluated, the understanding of the partners increases, and so on. Similarly, planning, doing and reflecting are always done simultaneously, even if one of these activities might be more prominent at any given time.

In the following pages, we describe briefly our current understanding of the three stages of the ARD action cycle, and introduce some of the concepts, approaches and tools that we hope will prove useful in improving your capacity for ARD.

2 Forming Partnerships

2.1 About Forming Partnerships

In this stage of the ARD learning cycle, different organizations or individuals who have an interest in a particular "development challenge" agree to work together to address that challenge. The starting point is an initial recognition by one or all of these stakeholders that the challenge that cannot be solved by one individual or organization alone. The "challenge" can be represented by a "problem", such as environmental degradation in a particular area, or it can be an "opportunity" such as selling a new product in national or even international markets. The common feature of all such complex challenges is that they require collective action, involving a range of stakeholders working in partnership.

The most important factor in the success of any partnership is shared objectives. At this early stage of partnership formation, the wider objectives (development goal, desired

outcome) need to be provisionally identified, as do the more specific outputs that might contribute to the shared goal (e.g. improved information services to farmers, improved policy recommendations, institutional change, research proposals, etc.). It is important that partners are honest in sharing their expectations from the partnership; that each partner recognise their own role and that which others have to play in meeting the shared objectives.

Following the definition of these objectives, a preliminary plan of interaction and financing will normally be necessary. At this stage, the work plan will be probably be directed mostly towards relatively short-term actions over several months to further analyse the situation with additional stakeholders ("achieving a common understanding") and then develop a longer-term concerted action plan of rural service provision (production, marketing, financial and business services), additional research, policy change and institutional development, etc. However, it is important that these preliminary, short-term actions fit into the overall work plans of each institution (otherwise these preliminary ARD activities will inevitably be considered an "extra" and hence low priority).

An important issue here is how to manage the partnership. Some type of steering committee or managerial team may be needed to agree on overall objectives, commit resources of individual partners and oversee the work. It may be useful to cement the partnership with a formal agreement of memorandum of understanding (but this may have disadvantages also). To implement the actions implied in this "ARD Learning Cycle" as described here, it is assumed that an inter-institutional team is formed to analyse the challenge, to develop and implement the concerted activities.

The management of these committees and teams will require clear planning, roles, and rules of conduct – including agreed mechanisms of decision-making. You will need to know which tasks should be undertaken in common, and which should be allocated to individual organizations, subgroups or persons based on mandate, expertise and skills. You will also need to know how these tasks can be coordinated. Team members need to be clearly mandated by their organisations and be given the time and other resources to make their contributions to the team at the agreed moments. The difficulties of working in teams should not be underestimated. Most professionals are educated as individuals; few have formal training in teamwork. Facilitating effective teamwork is usually the most difficult aspect of the ARD process.

Leadership is normally a critical issue in teamwork, especially when there is great diversity inside the team (disciplines, cultures, age, experience, etc.). The team has to decide the type of leadership that will most help achieve the objectives:

  ➢ A more facilitative type of leadership, where the leader creates conditions for other members to work better without necessarily having authority over them, is more effective where organizations and individuals come together as equals, and where new ideas need to be freely produced.

  ➢ A more affirmative type of leadership, where a particular person is recognised by other team members as having authority for decision-making, may be efficient in situations where time constraints exist and decisions must be made in order to meet deadlines.

2.2 Key Questions when Forming Partnerships

Objectives

  ➢ What goal do the partners want to achieve together?

  ➢ What are the medium-term outcomes desirable, which will contribute to the goal?

- What are the more concrete outputs the different partners will produce to achieve the outcome?
- What are the main assumptions made in constructing this series of causal linkages between objectives?
- What activities are necessary to achieve the outputs identified?

Partners

- Which stakeholders are most interested in addressing the development challenge identified?
- Which organizations have the mandate, the competencies (disciplinary expertise) and resources to address the challenge?
- Who should be included in the partnership?
- Who is responsible for the different outputs or activities planned?

Organization

- How can the partners organize to address the challenge?
- How will the activities of the different partners be coordinated?
- What teams are needed to steer and implement the process of working together?
- Who can best represent each partner in these teams?
- What is the optimum size for these teams?
- Is a formal agreement between partners necessary?

Management

- How will the teams established by the partnership be managed?
- What sort of leadership is most appropriate for the teams?
- What is the role of each team member?
- Are the time allocations for joint activities and logistical arrangements acceptable to all?
- What measures will be taken if institutional partners or team members do not live up to the expectations of others?

Funding

- What resources (human, financial, material) are necessary to implement the proposed activities of the partnership?
- If additional funding (above that included in the "regular" institutional budgets) is necessary, what the potential sources of such funding?
- What information do these potential funding sources need to be able to approve such funding? What activities are necessary to provide this funding?

Reflection and Learning

- What activities will the partners carry out to monitor and evaluate the achievement the agreed activities and objectives (outputs and outcomes)?
- What activities will the partners carry out to monitor and evaluate the process of working together?
- How will these lessons learned be used to adjust future activities of the specific partnership and the management and organization of the individual institutions involved?

3 Achieving a Common Understanding between Stakeholders

3.1 About Achieving a Common Understanding

Once a partnership has been formed, with agreed objectives and plan of action, the next stage of the ARD learning cycle is to explore more widely the development challenge as perceived by different stakeholders, not all of whom may be represented in the formal partnership. The emphasis on this stage is not to identify definitive solutions to the problem or actions to exploit the opportunity identified by the existing partners, but rather to get a wider picture of the situation as perceived by all the main stakeholders and achieve a common vision of what is desirable. Of course, as the team representing the partnership begins to talk to stakeholders initially identified, additional ones appear and understanding of the development challenge gradually evolves - it may turn out to be somewhat different than originally perceived by the partnership!

There is sometimes a temptation to regard "farmers" or "beneficiaries" of a particular development initiative as one group or "type" of stakeholder. However, farmers or rural households are never uniform: they have different interests, different resources, and have different ways of making a living. In other words, they have different "livelihood strategies". The partnership needs to explore these differences, to be able to subsequently analyse how different groups of rural households will be affected by, or will affect the development challenge. This process, which is part of stakeholder analysis, is sometimes called "typology".

Different stakeholders will have different ideas about what should be done about the issue. Every stakeholder will defend its own interests, and try to maximise its own potential gains. In fact, conflict between the different interests and stakeholder groups is normal. The objective of the partnership and the ARD process should not be to satisfy completely each stakeholder, nor should it be to "take sides" with one stakeholder against another. Rather, it should be to identify development objectives that all stakeholders can agree on: a "platform" which they can all share.

The ability to think in terms of systems is important at this stage, as it is often the relationship between factors that is critical to the understanding of the issue rather than an in-depth knowledge of any particular factor. Different types of systems diagrams can help explore these relationships and identify where to draw the boundaries of the study, or "system". Unstructured depiction of issues that appear important to different stakeholders ("rich pictures") can be a useful starting point. The elements and relationships around these issues can then be explored using concept maps, flow diagrams or problem-causal diagrams. It is then often useful to try and pull all these ideas together or focus the study by giving a name to the "system" which expresses the purpose of that system ("a system to … …….."). All these tools can promote communication of ideas and hence mutual understanding between team members, and between the team and other stakeholders.

When drawing a "system", or focussing on the critical issues which affect the development challenge, it is important also to distinguish between "internal factors" or "components" of the system and "external factors" or the "environment" of the system. Internal factors or elements are those that the team considers can be changed by future actions taken by the partnership; an example might be national policy on fertilizer subsidies. External factors are those which affect the issue or system, but which the team takes as given or beyond the scope of (eventual) action by the partnership; examples might be international trade policy, or changing market demands.

These external factors may be referred to as "driving forces", because they drive the changes in the system, or "macro-trends", to denote that they are changing, usually

gradually, and in a fairly predictable way (e.g. population pressure, migration, price of major commodities). When an external factor occurs - or might occur - sporadically and unpredictably it is often referred to as a "shock" (e.g. hurricane, disease outbreak). If the future combination of external forces can be predicted with some confidence, then the team can make a "forecast" of the future environment within which the system will function, and plan for this situation. If, however, different scenarios or combinations of external forces are possible, it may be useful to bear this in mind when later defining development options or strategies, so that the strategy developed will work under the most likely scenario, or at least not represent unacceptable risks should the potential shocks occur.

Wherever the team draws the boundaries of its "system", both internal and external factors are important. Development initiatives often fail not because actions were not taken as planned, but because assumptions about the way the external factors would change and/or influence the system were not well explored and turned out to be wrong.

3.2 Key Questions when Exploring the Issue with Stakeholders

Stakeholders

- ➢ Who are the main "stakeholders" in the issues around the development challenge?
- ➢ What are their interests and perspectives regarding the development challenge and actions that could be taken to improve the situation?

Livelihood strategies

- ➢ What are the different livelihood strategies of the different stakeholders?
- ➢ How can large stakeholder groups (such as "farmers", "rural households" or "communities") be broken down into more precise stakeholder groups for the purposes of analysis and planning?
- ➢ How are (or could) these different groups (be) affected by the development challenge?

The "system"

- ➢ How can the issue be described as a system?
- ➢ What is the purpose of this system?
- ➢ What are the components of the system that can be potentially addressed by the partnership?
- ➢ How do these components interact?
- ➢ What are the wider "driving forces" or external factors (e.g. policy, environmental, social and economic factors) that affect the system identified?

Future scenarios

- ➢ What assumptions can the partnership make concerning way in which these external factors will develop in future?
- ➢ Can different "scenarios" (combinations of driving forces) be identified?
- ➢ Which scenario is more likely? Are there scenarios that imply significant risks for the system?

Iteration

- ➢ Do new partners need to be included in the partnership?

> How can the development challenge (goal, outcomes, outputs, activities) be redefined to reflect the concerns of the different stakeholders and the improved understanding of the issue by the partnership?

> What adjustments need to be made to the organization and management of the partnership to reflect the addition of new partners and or the modified objectives?

4 Screening and Evaluating Actions

4.1 About Screening and Evaluating Options

In previous stages of the ARD learning cycle, partners have agreed and clarified common objectives and ways of managing their partnership. The partners may then go on to conduct further diagnostic research and planning: jointly analysing the current situation in more detail, identifying potential development options, and conducting an "ex-ante" analysis of the probable impact of these options on different stakeholders, and perhaps preparing a more comprehensive proposal for joint funding.

Alternatively, the partners may have already implemented research and development activities to improve production, marketing and local livelihoods, and may want to analyse the impact of these activities in an "ex-post" evaluation.

In either situation, partners will need to use different disciplinary and stakeholder perspectives to evaluate potential or achieved impact.

For example:

Using an **ecological or environmental perspective**, the partnership may conduct an analysis of the use of natural resources by the different stakeholders (and household types), and how these affect, and are affected by, the development challenge. When evaluating past R&D activities, the partners might evaluate how the natural resources have been affected by the development actions already carried out. In either situation, the partners will look at how resource use has changed over time, the reasons for this change, and how resources are likely to be used in the future to (continue to) meet the development challenge under the scenario(s) identified. Drawing maps and transects, resource flow charts, time lines and agricultural calendars with local people may be useful tools in exploring these issues in a way which promotes the participation of key stakeholder in the evaluation process. Such evaluation of the probable or actual impacts on the quality of natural resources allows modifications to future development actions which can be taken to reduce any future or potential negative impacts ("mitigating measures"). If environmental issues are considered to be important, or if project donors require this, a more complete "environmental impact analysis" may be necessary.

Using an **economic or commercial perspective,** the partnership looks at the actual (and/or) potential markets for goods being produced by the system, and at the profitability and competitiveness at the different points in the production and marketing chain. This means not only looking at how resources (capital, land, labour) are or have been employed to affect profitability at the farm level (e.g. by enterprise or farm budgeting), but also looking at grading, transport, and processing to see how value is (or could be) added at different points in the value chain, and where efficiency has been or could be improved to increase the competitiveness of the final product in the national or international marketplace. Depending on the perceptions of the different stakeholders involved in the production and marketing chain concerning weak links, it may be useful to include some of these stakeholders in the partnership (if they are not already present), and to conduct more in-depth cost-benefit analyses at the different points in the chain. The partnership may also

need to consider how production and trade incentives, such as labour controls, subsidies, import tariffs and price supports, etc. have changed or are likely to change in the future, nationally and internationally, and how these changes have affected or will affect the competitiveness of the enterprise(s). If the partnership can influence such price and policy measures, producing policy position papers or lobbying for change might form part of the concerted action plan of the partnership; otherwise these factors should be considered as "external" and actions planned on the basis of likely future scenarios. If this analytical aspect is considered critical, the partnership may need to carry out a full "policy analysis matrix".

Using a **social or institutional perspective**, the partnership looks at how decisions are made which affect the development challenge or the outcome of actions taken. This means understanding the social organisation of stakeholders; their roles, relative power, resource endowments, capabilities, interests and livelihood strategies. Again, the partnership should look at the dynamics of the situation: how this social organization has changed in the past, the reasons for this change, and how it might need to change in future to meet the development challenge. A key aspect of this social organization and decision-making structure is to identify who has access to, and who has control over the different resources used in the "system", and how this access/control may have changed as a result of activities by the partners. These resources could be natural (private and communal land, water, etc.), physical (infrastructure, equipment), financial (capital, income, credit), human (labour, skills, knowledge, information) and social (institutions, networks, etc.). Another important dimension to analyse is how the different stakeholders have acquired or will acquire the new knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to meet the development challenge. Collective action requires joint learning; and looking at the mechanisms and opportunities for such learning is critical. Finally, the partnership should consider who - which stakeholder or stakeholder group – has gained or will gain most, or who has or might loose out from the development options being considered. The proposed or actual strategy may then need to be modified to more carefully target expected gains to important stakeholder groups or types (such as poorer households, groups that have been disadvantaged in the past, etc). Useful techniques in this social analysis include mapping social groups or information flows, and contrasting relationships, access/control, benefits, etc., using stakeholder matrices.

4.2 Key Questions when Analysing Development Strategies

Ecological perspective

- ➢ What natural resources are used throughout the year in the system identified? How has the resource use changed over time? How is the quantity and quality of the resources changing?

- ➢ Who has access to these resources? How has this access changed, and why?

- ➢ Who controls the use of these resources? How has this control changed?

- ➢ What benefits do different stakeholders get out of this resource use, and at what 'cost'? How have these benefits changed: who has gained and who has "lost"?

- ➢ What are the implications for resource quantity and quality of proposed development activities? How has resource quantity and quality changed?

- ➢ How can future actions be modified to minimise any negative impacts observed or predicted?

Economic perspective

- ➢ Where are the actual and potential markets for the agricultural products of the system? How have these markets changed?

➢ What are the different operations in the production and marketing chain? How have these changed as a result of actions by stakeholders or as a result of external factors?

➢ How much value is added to the principal commodity at each link of the chain? How has this value addition changed?

➢ Where in the value chain can efficiency be improved, or has it been improved, to increase the competitiveness of the final product?

➢ What policy changes at national or international level have occurred, or may occur, that have affected or might affect future competitiveness (e.g. subsidies, tariffs, quotas, labour/environmental law, exchange rates, etc.)?

Social perspective

➢ Who has the power and interest to make the changes to the system needed to meet the development challenge? How has this power/interested changed?

➢ Who has access to the resources needed resolve the development challenge, and who controls this access? How has access/control changed and why?

➢ How has social organization changed, and how can it be improved to provide access to the resources needed?

➢ Who has benefited or been disadvantaged from changes to the system; or will benefit/be disadvantaged from the changes proposed to the system?

➢ What measures have been or can be taken to maximise the benefits gained by priority social groups, and/or to minimise costs to other stakeholders?

➢ How can continued learning and joint action by the partners and other key stakeholders be improved?

5 Acknowledgements