Learning alliances: An approach for building multi-stakeholder innovation systems

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Millions of dollars are spent each year on research and development (R&D) initiatives in an attempt to improve rural livelihoods in the developing world, but rural poverty remains an intractable problem in many places. There are many reasons for this; one being the limited collective learning that occurs between researchers, development workers, donors, policymakers and private enterprise. As a result, useful research results do not reach the poor, lessons learned do not influence research, and donor and policy agendas are less relevant than they could be. This Brief describes how the Rural Agroenterprise Development Project of the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) is addressing the problem. Through building learning alliances that engage multiple stakeholders in processes of innovation, the initiative is enhancing learning and improving effectiveness in rural enterprise development.

The learning alliance approach

A learning alliance is a process undertaken jointly by research organizations, donor and development agencies, policymakers and private businesses. The process involves identifying, sharing and adapting good practices in research and development in specific contexts. These can then be used to strengthen capacities, generate and document development outcomes, identify future research needs or areas for collaboration, and inform public and private sector policy decisions. It is important to note that existing sources of good practice may come from within the learning alliance (e.g. one or more of the partner organizations) or from outside (from a literature review or the practices of external organizations). The main challenge is to identify relevant good practices, adapt them to existing needs and contexts, apply them more widely and document and share the outcomes.

Why learning alliances?

There is a need to improve understanding of how to establish and maintain multi-stakeholder learning processes, since they can benefit the developing world in several ways. Firstly, they help develop and share knowledge about approaches, methods and policies that work, those that do not, and the reasons for success or failure. These can also be linked to different geographical and cultural contexts. Shared knowledge of this kind can contribute to improved development outcomes as lessons are learned and practice or policy modified accordingly. Secondly, learning alliances give participants the opportunity to learn across organizational and geographical boundaries. Thirdly, they promote synergy among actors by providing a vehicle for collaboration, helping to highlight and develop solutions to problems that may appear intractable to individual actors. This leads to more rapid and effective innovation processes, helps focus research on key problems, provides development agencies and policymakers with access to specialized knowledge, and brings fresh insights to the assessment and improvement of performance. Fourthly, learning alliances contribute to healthy innovation systems by building bridges between islands of success, helping to assess how this success was achieved and what others can learn from this experience. Finally, they provide a flexible mechanism that can be adapted to topics that are beyond the scope of agricultural research but vital for improving rural livelihoods (e.g. healthcare, education, water and sanitation and natural resource management).

Key principles for successful learning alliances

Clear objectives: These are based on the needs, capacities and interests of the participating organizations and individuals. What does each organization bring to the alliance? What complementarities or gaps exist? What does each organization hope to achieve through the collaboration?

Shared responsibilities, costs and credit: A learning alliance seeks to benefit all parties; therefore costs/responsibilities and proper credit for achievements should be shared among the partners.

Outputs as inputs: Rural communities are diverse and there are no universally applicable recipes for sustainable development. Learning alliances view R&D outputs as inputs to the process of rural innovation that are place- and time-specific. Methods and tools developed by researchers will change as users adapt them to the needs and realities of different situations. Understanding why adaptations occur, the extent that these lead to positive or negative changes in livelihoods, and documenting and sharing lessons learned are key challenges.

Differentiated learning mechanisms: Learning alliances have a diverse range of participants, from people with rural-based livelihoods through extension service and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers, to entrepreneurs, policymakers and scientists. Identifying each group's questions and/or willingness

to participate in the learning process is critical to success. Flexible but connected learning methods are needed, ranging from participatory monitoring and evaluation, through conventional impact assessment to the development of innovation histories.

Long-term, trust-based relationships: Rural development processes may last for many years or even decades. To influence positive change and understand why that change has occurred requires long-term, stable relationships capable of evolving to meet new challenges. Trust is the glue that cements these relationships.

How to establish a learning alliance

The learning alliances established by the Rural Agroenterprise Development Project at CIAT seek to: a) build links between researchers, donor and development agencies, the public sector and private enterprise to achieve more effective processes of rural enterprise development; b) establish an innovation system that matches the supply of new ideas with demand at the field or policy level; c) open communication channels between diverse organizations with relevant experiences; and (d) design and test tools and methods for analysis and documentation that facilitate collective learning within and between organizations.

The major contribution of CIAT, or other research partners, to development, policymaker and private sector partners in a learning alliance is to help them move from single-cycle learning processes (planning, followed by action, evaluation of results, and back to planning to start another single cycle) to a 'double-loop' process. This includes a period of reflection after results are evaluated, when the partners review the basic premises on which strategic decisions are based. A double loop helps to avoid the trap of replicating ineffective approaches by facilitating critical thinking about what actually needs to be done (Fairbanks and Lindsay, 1999). The application of a double-loop learning process for each topic of interest (see Figure 1) is the primary means by which the alliance learns.

To achieve these aims, CIAT has implemented the following steps:
1. Identify and convene partner organizations with an interest in rural enterprise development.
2. Develop clear objectives, roles and responsibilities for the learning alliance.
3. Define specific topics of interest based on partner needs and priorities.
4. Implement a double-loop learning cycle for each topic of interest.
5. Share results among researchers, practitioners and policymakers.

Phase 1. Reviewing our framework: In this phase, the learning alliance partners identify any problems that are limiting the success of their interventions. They also try to view the issues from different perspectives and reflect critically on existing practice. This step helps to avoid the single-loop learning trap described above and leads to the identification and clear definition of a set of topics on which the alliance agrees to work. Once a topic has been selected, the partners spell out the questions that need resolving. These frame the learning process and may range from basic development issues to full-blown research hypotheses, depending on the participants' interests (capacity building or strategic research) or intervention scale (micro, meso or macro).

Next, the partners undertake a review of existing practice, which notes relevant and existing knowledge, results and/or literature, institutional experience and current work by partner organizations. Special attention is paid to documenting positive experiences or 'islands of success' that exist in similar cultural or geographic contexts, since these can often yield useful lessons or inputs for the learning process. The partners share the results of the review in a workshop and short document. This process helps identify lessons learned in a specific context and initiates the sharing of experiences and knowledge within and across organizations. The review leads into a process where diverse tools, methods, approaches or intervention strategies are selected, adapted and/or designed to equip partners with the necessary skills and information they need to apply good practice in the field. Toolkits are designed as prototypes, which different partner organizations are expected to adapt to suit individual needs and contexts.

Phase 2. Implementing strategic actions: The learning alliance then facilitates the use of the selected or designed tools, methods, approaches and strategies within ongoing development projects, validating their usefulness and adapting them to different contexts. The alliance also organizes capacity-building efforts to ensure that all partners can use and adapt the contents of the toolkit to their contexts. The capacity building effort may involve CIAT or may be initiated by one or more of
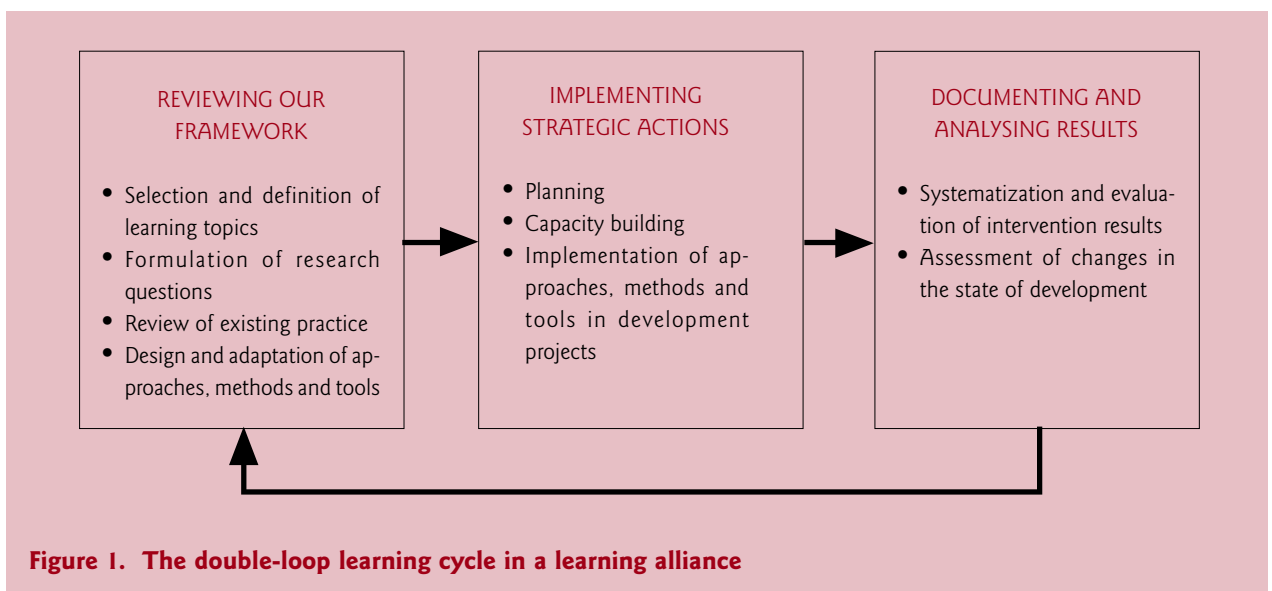
REVIEWING OUR FRAMEWORK

- Selection and definition of learning topics
- Formulation of research questions
- Review of existing practice
- Design and adaptation of approaches, methods and tools

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC ACTIONS

- Planning
- Capacity building
- Implementation of approaches, methods and tools in development projects

DOCUMENTING AND ANALYSING RESULTS

- Systematization and evaluation of intervention results
- Assessment of changes in the state of development

Figure 1. The double-loop learning cycle in a learning alliance

the partner organizations, and it may be formal (e.g. workshops) or informal (e.g. cross visits or consultations). The emphasis is on building the capacity of the partners to understand the underlying principles and to adapt the approaches or strategies to individual needs and contexts.

Finally, participating partner organizations apply the approaches and toolkits in the context of existing development projects, document the results and share them with others. Ongoing informal consultations between participating partner organizations are promoted so that evolving results, both positive and negative, are quickly shared across partner organizations and incorporated into ongoing work. Maintaining a focus on existing development activities helps ensure the tools are practical and solve real-life problems.

Phase 3: Documenting and analysing results: The learning cycle is completed only when results are properly documented, analysed and translated into broadly applicable lessons. Thus, throughout the process of toolkit design, capacity building and field application, processes and results should be documented and shared using simple frameworks. Methods can include workshops, training and reflection sessions, joint fieldwork, process documentation and the use of a virtual learning platform and list server (e.g. www.alianzasdeaprendizaje.org).

The learning cycle concludes with a critical review of the field experience based on the initial questions defined in Phase 1. This stage allows participants to reflect on deeper issues that may not be part of their daily work. It also provides inputs for the construction of new approaches, intervention strategies, tools and methods. The reflection process is documented in a short summary document and shared with alliance members. One or more additional learning cycles may take place if there are significant unanswered or new questions that the partner agencies wish to review in greater detail.

Learning alliances in practice

CIAT first experimented with this approach in 2000 in collaboration with CARE Nicaragua and eight local partners in 10 municipalities. From there the idea moved to eastern Africa, where a six-nation learning alliance was established with the East Africa regional office of Catholic Relief Services (CRS). These two experiences constitute a first phase of work, where the basic concepts of learning alliances were developed, tools were tested and promising initial results were achieved.

From 2003 onwards, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has supported a second phase of work in Central America that differs from the first phase in several ways. Firstly, since its inception in 2003, the learning alliance in Central America has involved multiple partners, including CARE, the Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE), CIAT, CRS, Germany's Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the National Agricultural University of Honduras, The Netherlands Development Cooperation Service (SNV), Swisscontact and IDRC itself. Secondly, the Central American case marks the first use of a virtual learning platform to facilitate learning within and across partner organizations. And a third difference is the explicit intent to incorporate donor agencies as key stakeholders in the learning alliance, although this goal has proved difficult to achieve in practice.

The most advanced ideas on learning alliances are being implemented in the Andean Region of South America. This work most closely mirrors the conceptual model explained above in that it explicitly involves the public sector, has partner demands for learning as the entry point and focuses more on collaborative strategic research than on capacity building. Research issues include: a) public policy and links

between market chains and local economic development; b) rural enterprise development and the inclusion of smallholders in market chains; c) governance, representation and equity in market chains; and d) knowledge management for innovation in market chains.

A final element is a global initiative between CIAT and CRS to develop or strengthen learning alliances in 30 countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia. This proposal is similar to existing work with CRS in eastern Africa from Phase 1, in that it focuses on capacity building around CIAT tools for rural enterprise development, but it also incorporates some elements of Phase 2 (e.g. the use of a multi-lingual virtual learning platform) and could potentially evolve into a platform for strategic research. The scope of this global learning alliance with CRS presents its own special demands and opportunities for learning across geographic and cultural boundaries.

Challenges for learning alliances

A learning alliance approach is not suited to all agricultural research projects. For researchers and projects who work directly with or hope to effect change on a given rural innovation system, however, this approach can be of significant use. The following challenges and recommendations were highlighted by CIAT's experience.

Partner and participant selection: The selection of partner agencies and appropriate individuals within those agencies is critical to the success of a learning alliance. Both agencies and individuals should be open to critical reflection and learning about their own practices. In addition, partner and participant turnover should be avoided or at least minimized, since this has a significant negative impact on the learning process.

Process facilitation and coordination: Establishing a learning alliance, while it takes time, is relatively straightforward once appropriate partners and individuals have been identified. The maintenance of the learning alliance and its on-going facilitation, however, are a separate challenge. To stay vibrant, a learning alliance must adapt and change as learning occurs and new questions arise. CIAT recommends assigning research and support staff to this area to ensure that goals are met and partners do not lose interest. While the largest share of development project budgets will be allocated to project implementation, financial resources are also needed to support time for personnel to engage in learning alliance activities.

Funding: Finding a donor agency interested in funding an open-ended learning process is likely to be difficult, and it may be easier to get funding for specific research and development projects that use a learning alliance as an implementation mechanism. Funding for learning alliances can also be secured by linking to large development initiatives, since this makes efficient use of researchers' time and alliance activities can complement dissemination and training budgets. The issue of funding should be discussed early during project design and in the alliance-building process to guarantee a modicum of sustainability.

Linking learning across levels: Documenting, analysing and sharing learning from diverse partner agencies at the micro, meso and macro scales is very demanding for all participants, while drawing out key livelihood and policy implications from such a wide range of experiences takes a good deal of thought and time. Selecting a few key research questions that link partner agencies is one way to manage the high demands of the learning alliance approach. Equally, the creative application of diverse tools and methods to promote network building among

partners and the use of decentralized processes of reflection and learning will also help (e.g. regional learning fairs with local partners, topic-driven short workshops, virtual discussions).

By promoting the learning alliance approach, CIAT is acting as a learning facilitator and adding value to existing activities, responding to partner demands, and linking research and development processes. After 4 years of effort, the approach is being successfully adapted to many different needs and is providing a host of learning opportunities.

Further reading

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