

Learning alliances for poverty reduction

Institutional learning and change

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Agriculture is back on the international agenda. The most recent World Development Report looks at learning for farmers but largely ignores the need for learning in institutions, including agricultural research centres.

Most agricultural research and development (R&D) institutions have been shaped by traditional approaches to technology transfer, in which farmers, extension agencies and civil society organisations passively accept the technologies delivered by researchers. These linear approaches of the 'Green Revolution' were based on the objective of increasing food supplies in resource-rich regions, using improved crop varieties that require increased external inputs.

This high-input model is now facing serious challenges due to its unsustainable use of resources, the pressure on the environment, and its inability to address the needs of small farmers. The rising costs of farm inputs and the falling prices of some agricultural produce have increased income inequalities, and have added to the burden of impacts on rural communities.

Coping with these changes will require much more than increased investment in agricultural R&D. The large research institutions need to realise that they are just one part of an interconnected system. Unlike in the past, they are neither the sole sources of knowledge, nor can they claim to have all the answers to the problem of how to reduce poverty. If they are to be effective, they will have to become less isolated and more responsive to small farmers.

Farmers first

In recent years a group of interdisciplinary researchers has been engaged in a process of critical thinking about impact assessment techniques, 'farmer first' approaches to agricultural research, and a systems view of innovation. Under an initiative known as the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC), the participants believe that collaborative research programmes could play a key role in pro-poor innovation. First, however, organisations need to develop their capacity for learning, and to transform the patterns of interaction with other actors in the system. This is possible through action research and action learning.

The ILAC team has captured many stories of change at major research centres such as the International Crop Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). These 'innovation histories' often show that when researchers adopt a more open approach and are willing to learn together with non-researchers, they are able to increase the uptake and impact of their research. For decades research was stuck in a paradigm of one-way technology transfer, with limited uptake by farmers. The ILAC initiative has led to new approaches and tools that are now being used to move agricultural research towards pro-poor innovation. One of these approaches has involved the creation of learning alliances.

Learning alliances in practice

The learning alliance approach emphasises the processes of innovation, and involves collective learning by research organisations, donor agencies, policy makers, civil society organisations and even private businesses. The alliances enable participants to learn across organisational and geographical boundaries, and provide vehicles for collaboration and sharing knowledge about approaches, methods and policies that work, and those that do not. By improving the flows of information and knowledge, these multi-stakeholder platforms help to speed up the process of identifying and developing innovations, and ensuring their adoption by farmers.

Non-pesticidal management

One of these learning alliances is working to reduce the amounts of pesticides used by farmers in Andhra Pradesh, India. The alliance members include a parastatal agency, the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, various community-based organisations and a network of NGOs. The alliance grew out of informal collaborations between research centres and civil society organisations to explore innovative practices such as lighting bonfires to deal with insect pests. Through a collective learning process, the alliance developed a new system of non-pesticidal management (NPM) practices for a wide range of crops.

In 2002 the Centre for World Solidarity (CWS), an NGO based in Hyderabad, began to disseminate information about the system via its network of partners. Few farmers in the region use formal extension services, but in less than four years, the NPM system had been adopted by 100,000 farmers in 1500 villages. The programme has been a remarkable success. Many farming communities have now completely eliminated the use of pesticides.

The learning alliance also provided a platform for scaling up the use of the system as an alternative to the input-intensive practices that were likely to fail. The alliance has therefore helped not only to reduce environmental stress, but also to open up new markets for the region's organic produce, both local and international, thus increasing the incomes of many small farmers. Most important, much of the alliance's success has been due to women who took the lead in what is arguably one of the world's largest ecological farming projects. As the collective learning has continued, the alliance has helped farmers move away from technology-based methods of pest management, and to adopt a broader approach known as community-managed sustainable agriculture. The Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA), an NGO that grew out of CWS, has also adopted the principle of collective learning, and intends to create new institutional platforms and learning alliances to scale up the approach and transform agricultural practices throughout

the state.

The NPM alliance is working to improve the livelihoods of small farmers, tenants and farm workers using local resources. It is managed by community organisations using novel extension mechanisms and farmers as resource persons. The CSA, through its partners, provides technical support and training, and takes the lead in bringing together stakeholders at various levels. Buoyed by its success, the NPM alliance has sought and received policy support to extend the community-managed sustainable agriculture approach to 1 million farmers in Andhra Pradesh in



System of rice intensification

Learning alliances may also be facilitated by outside agencies, such as when the various members have different ideas about the process of innovation, and bringing them together could lead to conflict. In Orissa, a poor state in eastern India, the Xavier Institute of Management was able to apply its understanding of innovation systems to facilitate a new learning alliance to promote a new way of growing rice. Known as the system of rice intensification (SRI), this is an interesting agro-ecological innovation that was developed in Madagascar and is now in use in 30 countries. Unlike

conventional methods of raising productivity through genetic improvement and increasing inputs, SRI relies on providing an enabling environment for the rice plant to express itself fully. The system involves a combination of several principles, including the use of organic inputs, alternate wetting and drying, increased spacing between plants, and transplanting the plants while they are young. Although the method has been successful among farmers across the world, it has met with resistance from rice research organisations.

An earlier study of SRI had found that actors such as government departments and civil society

organisations elsewhere in India were working independently, and sometimes in adversarial ways. Recognising these institutional pitfalls in a complex environment where none of the actors had complete information or access to resources, the Xavier Institute organised a workshop for dialogue on SRI at the state level. The workshop did not focus only on formal knowledge, and so provided an atmosphere in which farmers and NGOs felt able to contribute, and agriculture department officials were willing to learn from others.

The trust built by the alliance, and its ability to link isolated success stories, have led to greater policy support for SRI in Orissa state. One large private donor has chosen Orissa as one of the states for testing ways to improve productivity in rainfed rice-growing areas, and the government of India has provided support through its National Food Security Mission for the state. All of this has happened due to the new approach of working together, rather than just the large numbers in the field. The open sharing of results has helped to improve accountability, and the various actors have repositioned themselves to explore possible synergies with others. The experience has encouraged other Indian states to create similar learning alliances. Thus Orissa, a late starter in SRI technologically, has provided the institutional lead for the rest of the country.

Open communication

The success of the learning alliance approach is based on the ability of the facilitating organisations to open up channels of communication between diverse partners. In particular, organisations with experience in designing and testing analytical tools and methods can facilitate collective learning within and between organisations. Not all of these need to be formal, novel institutional mechanisms. The SRI alliance organises experience-sharing workshops, for example, which ensure the much faster spread of ideas than is possible using conventional extension methods.

In the case of the NPM learning alliance, the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture has only 15 staff members but has been able to scale up the NPM approach through its network of grassroots organisations. Donor agencies can often play an important role by being active members of a learning alliance. One donor, for example, facilitated a popular SRI internet group in India, and invited all its partners to participate, as well as many other actors involved in promoting SRI across the country. The learning alliance concept will continue to evolve in various sectors as the participants gain experience in how best they can be facilitated, and in managing the new expectations that they are creating.

Learning together often pushes existing institutional arrangements to become more open. The results can be surprising, sometimes leading to reversals of traditional roles ? extension agencies and civil society organisations doing research, and research institutions repositioning themselves as knowledge brokers. They could lead to new learning laboratories and platforms where researchers can learn, reflect and report even if they do not have all the answers. This can lead to new knowledge emerging from healthier and more equal interactions among hitherto powerful scientific hierarchies. All of these changes are to be welcomed if we are serious about addressing the complex challenges facing the ?bottom billion? in the future.

Further reading

[Institutional Learning and Change \(ILAC\) initiative.](#)

M. Lundy and M.V. Gottret (2005)

[Learning Alliances: An Approach for Building Multi-stakeholder Innovation Systems.](#) IDRC.

C. Shambu Prasad, K. Beumer and D. Mohanty (2007)

[Towards a Learning Alliance: SRI in Orissa.](#) Xavier Institute of Management/WWF Dialogue project. India.

L. Watts and D. Horton (2007)

[Institutional Learning and Change: An initiative to promote greater impact through agricultural research for poverty alleviation.](#) Paper presented at the workshop 'Farmer First Revisited: Farmer Participatory R&D 20 Years On?', IDS.