

Strengthening Partnerships for Agricultural Development: Perspective from GFAR

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Why partnerships – the development dimension

Globalisation of the world economy and the processes of structural reform that have taken place in most countries over the past twenty years have had a significant effect on how agriculture is practised by farmers and on the demands placed on the organisations that provide development and research services to the agriculture sector.

For survival in this rapidly changing environment, farmers have had to become aware of and adjust to new market demands and access new knowledge and technology that will help maintain their livelihoods in an ever more competitive world. The institutions that support agricultural development have also needed to change, adapting to an environment with significantly reduced public support, and where the emphasis on increasing food, feed and fibre productivity has been widened to include profitability, quality, environmental and social objectives.

The complexity of these challenges – both in terms of generating new knowledge and technology and in promoting socio-economic development - goes beyond the bounds of any single discipline, any single institution or any single sector. Hence, the ever increasing imperative of bringing together the right partners, at the right time to tackle the right job, as a means of accelerating the rate of innovation so that the benefits of development come more quickly to those that need them most.

Why partnerships – the institutional dimension

While partnerships are now recognised as being an important, if not essential, means of achieving ever more complex development goals among persons and institutions that share common objectives, they are also seen as avenues for reducing costs, increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of research, and increasing access to resources. It is known that successful collaboration is built on the understanding that responsibility, information, trust, costs, and benefits have to be shared equitably among the participants. There are many hurdles to successful collaboration, and transaction costs can be high. There is increased investment in communication, travel, equipment, and administration. Response times in decision-making can be slower while all partners and affected stakeholders are informed and consulted.

GFAR's role in strengthening of partnerships

GFAR envisages a future in which the scientific community, and all other stakeholders involved in agricultural research for development, collaborate and work together as equal partners to find policy, technical and socio-economic solutions to the triple scourges of poverty, food insecurity and the degradation of natural resources.

As a contribution to this vision, GFAR acts as a value-adding “service” that encourages the testing of innovative approaches and methodologies to build strong and well-focused

partnerships among research and development practitioners that are cost-effective, equitable and demand driven. GFAR's objective is twofold:

- (i) to encourage new partners to join forces and to contribute to the formulation and execution of R&D programmes that tackle priority issues critical for meeting development goals;
- (ii) to facilitate the exchange of information between stakeholders and regions.

This presentation will provide examples of the role that GFAR is playing (a) to learn and share experiences about how partnerships can be built and consolidated and (b) to promote good practice in the establishment of research partnerships.

We identify three key moments:

- (i) priority setting and identification of potential themes susceptible to partnership approaches,
- (ii) building consensus around a set of issues that need to be addressed to tackle a selected theme,
- (iii) the implementation of actions by the selected partners to produce tangible development outcomes.

Priority setting

The origins of strong research partnerships are at the stage of priority setting. Whether at the global, regional or local level, priorities that have been set with participation and active involvement of all relevant stakeholders are likely to have much higher levels of success. GFAR pays special attention to promoting the involvement of farmer organisations, development practitioners – and particularly NGOs – and, where appropriate, the private sector in priority setting exercises organised by its Regional Forums. Some stakeholders face handicaps in engaging actively and equitably in these processes, and GFAR is playing an important role in making sure that these stakeholders increasingly have the skills required to achieve a balanced involvement in setting the agricultural R&D agenda.

Building consensus

Once potential themes have been identified around which partnerships can be built, there is a need to reach a common understanding about the issues that need to be tackled, and to define objectives, strategies, and the R&D interventions required to achieve the desired outputs. This part of the process also requires that appropriate stakeholders are consulted about perceived opportunities and constraints, potential intervention strategies and how research results can be ultimately converted into development outcomes. Our presentation will illustrate how this process is being achieved in two themes of global priority: "Information and Communication Management" and "Post-harvest Management, Marketing and Enterprise Development". While at a regional and national level, we will show how GFAR is promoting good practice in partnership building through the DURAS project's Competitive Grants Scheme that incorporates the concepts and principles of partnership and inclusiveness espoused by GFAR stakeholders.

Implementing actions

The previous steps will have laid the basis for chosen partners, with agreed upon roles and responsibilities, to initiate actions that will likely include doing things together using partners' own resources and also preparing project proposals for obtaining funds to expand activities. The example of PROLINNOVA, a Civil Society Organisation led multi-stakeholder initiative, will be used to illustrate the advantages associated with bottom-up approaches to partnership programmes, and where monitoring and evaluation processes are seen as a key element of strengthening partnerships where changes in attitudes and behaviour are seen as important as the building of skills or the generation of knowledge and technology. In contrast, the programme on Underutilised Species will illustrate how different themes require different approaches to partnership building, and the importance of advocacy, public awareness and policy interventions to achieve certain desired outcomes.

Through the initiatives promoted and facilitated by GFAR, we hope to gain a greater understanding of how to bring different stakeholders together effectively, and to learn and share the experiences obtained as a contribution to a better functioning of the global agricultural research system.