Innovative partnerships for better integration and impact

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The impact of research for agricultural development increasingly depends on partnerships and on how partners work together – from the conception of ideas to project monitoring and evaluation. The more complex the problem to be solved, the greater the need for integration. However, integration and partnership across disciplines, institutions, and countries represents a challenge, which many public research organizations, especially the biggest ones, have been slow to address. This paper presents and illustrates two different innovative tools for achieving better integration at the institutional level.

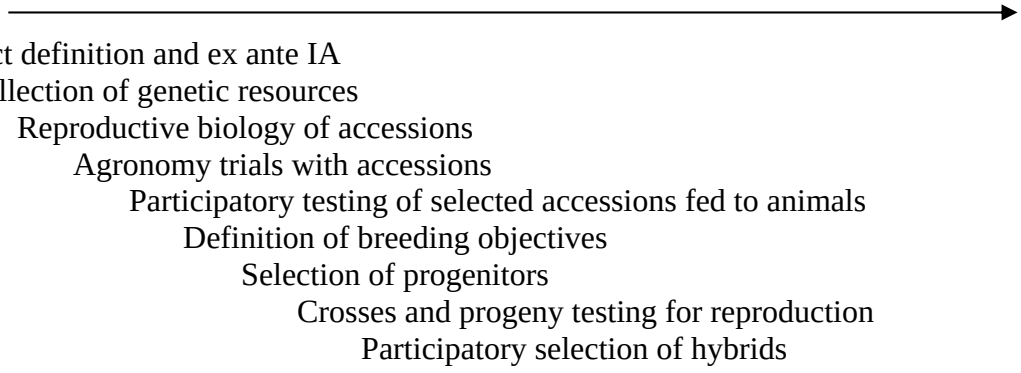
The Product Concept Approach

The center of diversity for Guinea grass lies in East Africa. Extensively collected in the late 1960s by France's IRD (Institut de Recherche pour le Développement) and used by many research projects worldwide, this forage grass reached small-scale crop-livestock farmers in Southeast Asia in the early 2000s and had a strongly positive impact there. Yet, while the result was a success, it took 35 years for the wild plant to become a cultivar, first moving from the hands of IRD to those of Embrapa and CIAT and ending up at NAFRI in Laos just a few years ago. This process could have been handled better (see Figure 1) and faster, had the original idea been appropriated upfront by the whole range of stakeholders. Instead, and as is still the case in most upstream research, IRD worked alone, expecting that applied research organizations would take the torch some day and continue its work.

Scientists currently have little, if any, incentive to share and discuss their ideas with partners before writing and submitting proposals. The beauty of the research product concept is that it helps scientists from all disciplines and all partners to develop a sense of common ownership and to provide donors with better guarantees that outputs and outcomes will be delivered in a timely fashion.

Though widely used in the private sector, the product concept approach is ignored by most public research institutions. Currently being experimented with by the CGIAR HarvestPlus Challenge Program, it will soon be tested at an individual CGIAR-supported Center, namely CIAT.

Figure 1. Product: Improved forage grasses for small-scale crop-livestock systems in Southeast Asia.



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Participatory testing of hybrids fed to animals
Multiplication of basic seed
Delivery systems

Evolution of partnerships
-- All >>ARI >> Centres >> NARS >> NGOs and/or Private sector ⟶

External Laboratories

The external lab - LABEX – is an idea developed at Embrapa, when the Brazilian agricultural research organization acknowledged that its scientists needed to strengthen contacts with the best research laboratories abroad, not only by sending PhD students, as had been done for a long time, but in other ways involving senior staff. Rather than build its own technology platform, i.e., its own external laboratory in a university in the northern hemisphere, Embrapa opted for a virtual lab, a lab without walls, using existing facilities.

The procedure for creating a LABEX is as follows:

- Negotiate a general umbrella agreement with a large university, national institute or cluster of research organizations.
- Select a limited number of priority domains, e.g., plant biotechnology, natural resource management, animal health, etc.
- Open a call for candidates among senior staff for 2-year appointments abroad, renewable once.
- Have the chosen candidates select the best lab or team working in their priority domain.
- Develop a collaborative program with this team.
- Ask the chosen candidates to spend half their time working with the host team on their project(s) and half on monitoring science and technology in their host country or region, feeding an Embrapa information network in their area of expertise.

The first LABEX was established in 1998 with the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Research Service (ARS). The second opened during 2002 at Agropolis in France.

"*No Brasil, temos um problema de evasão de cérebros. E que não perdemos cérebros.*"
(Claudio de Moura Castro, Veja, November 2001)

After three years, the LABEX in France had produced impressive outputs. Besides preparing many publications and participating in international congresses, the scientists of the LABEX have helped develop several new collaborative projects with French and other European labs. The networking, visibility and attractiveness of the LABEX have also permitted many other Brazilian scientists to come to Montpellier for variable but often long periods of time. The participation of Embrapa in international programs has been strengthened through the LABEX, as in the case of the Generation Challenge Program of the CGIAR.

Research produces innovations that benefit farmers around the world. Their needs are highly variable, though, as with, for example, animal production in Mato Grosso, Brazil, compared with that in northern Laos. Innovation is therefore also required in building partnerships to attend to farmers' diverse needs in the most effective way.