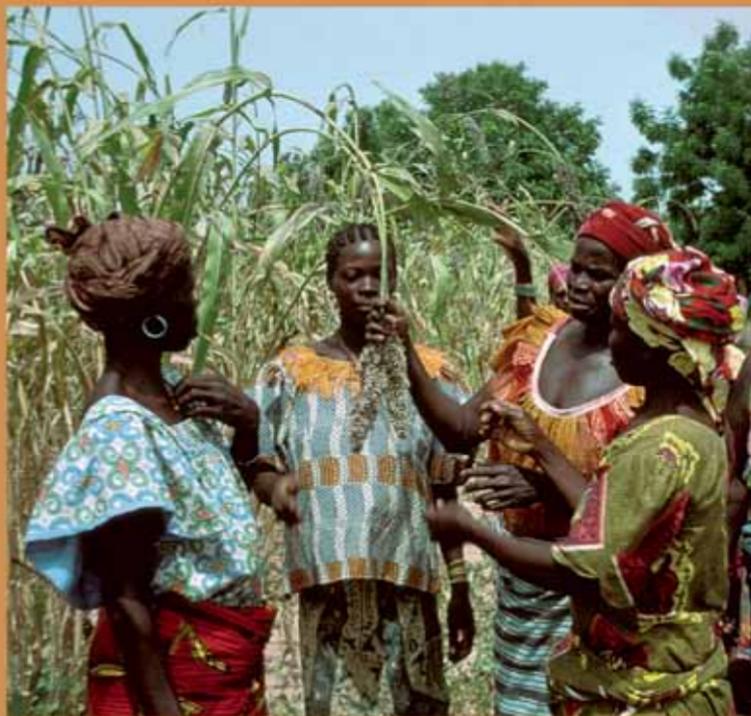




Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world

Action research in partnership

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5. Emergence of the collective

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This chapter covers in depth some topics touched on briefly in Part 1. In particular, it deals with the emergence of the ARP collective, a process that needs careful thought.

Contours of the initial collective

An ARP collective changes with time and with continued collaboration. Its initial composition and form deserve special reflection because they have a bearing on the formulation of the problem and can often lead the collective on a particular course which may not be easy to change further down the road.

Three factors influence the initial shape of the collective and they are discussed below: the type of initiators, the level of complexity of the initial problem, and the diversity of the stakeholders concerned.

▮ Initiator(s)

An ARP collective starts taking shape by the initiative of one or more stakeholders, interested in a given issue and/or desiring change (see Chapter 3, “Fundamental principles of an action-research partnership approach,” page 41). For example, it can be a researcher or a research team that wants to partner with development actors. The initiative may also come from other stakeholders – individuals or organizations such as producer organizations, NGOs, local administrations, industries, associations, or territorial communities – who require the help of researchers to resolve a problem affecting their activities.

The initiative can be, for example, the result of a prior agreement between two organizations, or a research institution and a farmer organization. The initiative takers can also be individuals, acting more or less independently of their parent institutions.

The initial configuration often determines the collective’s functioning which itself depends on more or less formalized relationships between individuals or institutions.

▮ Complexity of the initial problem and partnerships

The number of stakeholders required in the collective is often related to the complexity of the problem at hand.



In some cases, the ARP can be structured around a problem that is relatively isolated and clearly defined by the stakeholders concerned. Such a problem can usually be addressed within a predetermined, reasonable time in a framework involving minimal negotiations. For example, if a cocoa-producers' organization wishes to improve its techniques for the chemical protection of cocoa pods from brown rot disease, it could enter into collaboration with a phytopathologist to develop new treatment practices.

On the other hand, if this same organization wants to increase its annual sales of cocoa, it could associate itself not only with phytopathologists or production agronomists but also with economists specializing in marketing, perhaps even specialists in primary harvest and crop storage. Apart from the researchers, it may be worthwhile to include other actors in the cocoa supply chain in the ARP's collective, such as transporters and exporters, with the aim of designing and testing a realistic and practical plan development.

▮ Expanding the collective: willingness and possibilities

In some situations, the partnership is dominated by the relationship between researchers and farmers or between researchers and a farmers' organization. In others, the process of building a collective can be more open and, thus, there may be many more partners interacting on the same problem.

In the example of treating cocoa against brown rot disease, the first situation leads to a conventional collective which brings together phytopathologists and cocoa farmers. In the second, the collective will also include the local agent of the Agricultural Ministry's phytosanitary team, the representative of the chemicals firm that distributes fungicidal products, and the manager of a "green" project for obtaining cocoa with "low levels of chemical residues" and for setting up a supply chain for such cocoa.

The capabilities of some stakeholders to emerge and to be taken into account are additional factors that determine the number of partners in an ARP, as we will show in Chapter 7, "Introducing action research rooted in partnership: the Unai project in Brazil" (page 97).



Criteria for selecting members of the collective

Stakeholders of an ARP process do not all have the same level of involvement in the approach. We can distinguish between:

- A “hard core” of partners very involved in the discussion on goals, establishment of set-ups, and planning and evaluation of activities;
- More peripheral stakeholders who participate in some planned activities (producers limiting their participation to conducting agronomic tests on their fields, for example);
- Service providers who intervene on demand, often against payment, for conducting some limited activity (conducting of surveys by student interns or mobilization of an expert, for example);
- Individuals or institutions having a significant political or strategic role without being directly connected with the ARP (the governor of the province or the representative of a ministry under whose ambit the project falls, for example).

In the face of such diversity, it is useful to specify the criteria for characterizing various types of ARP stakeholders. These criteria help judge each participant’s appropriateness and potential contribution, as well as his or her possible position and weight within the collective.

▮ Representativeness

Researchers, when they are the ARP initiators and, in particular, when they intervene in poorly structured rural socio-professional contexts, tend to choose their partners and work locations based on their own technical, biophysical, and socio-economic perception of the diversity of conditions and people. In doing so, they hope that they will be able to extrapolate the results obtained to the entire target zone or at least to situations with similar characteristics.

While such an approach meets the legitimate requirement of defining the domain of recommendation of the results obtained, the choices made (of sites, of stakeholders) may not be relevant with respect to the need for building a collective problem-set or conducting activities. Nor does it ensure that the stakeholders thus associated with the ARP will be truly motivated.

To overcome this difficulty, researchers can take another approach to building an ARP collective. They base their choices and criteria not on the representativeness as such, but on taking into consideration the



local dynamics, existing stakeholder networks, and the concerns of the corresponding stakeholders.

With non-researchers as the ARP initiators, one could assume that the choice of participants will be sure to be relevant and that the group will be more committed to any collective action. But even in these cases, stakeholders of an ARP should collectively examine the real representativeness of the initiators as far as issues and local structures are concerned: Does this specific small group of farmers truly have the same concerns as all the farmers in the area or does it only represent itself? Is this elected municipal official really expressing the problems of his community and the way the community expects them to be handled or is he merely pushing his own perception of the situation and his own ideas for solving the problem? Is the producers' representative really speaking on behalf of his association or does his position only express his personal viewpoint?

▮ Legitimacy

Partners of the collective have to go beyond the representativeness criterion to also question the participants' legitimacy. Legitimacy can refer to two distinct concepts. First of all, it can be understood as the recognition of a stakeholder by his or her peers, by other collectives he or she is a member of, or by an institution he or she represents (producers' representative, elected official, a person respected in his or her network). This type of legitimacy is usually limited to a specific technical, social, institutional, or other domain.

The type of questions that need to be then asked are: Will the commitments made by this representative of an association of large grain wholesalers be truly respected by all his organization's members or do they only bind him? Are there mechanisms for discussing and validating positions taken by the representative within his organization, and for ensuring that the approved position will be respected by the other members?

Secondly, legitimacy can refer to a wider political dimension. The ARP collective could consider legitimate the inclusion of women's representatives or those of small farmers or ethnic minorities to help empower historically marginalized groups.

▮ Skills

Skills and knowhow can also be part of the criteria for selecting members of the collective. Thus, an agronomist working on managing soil



fertility, much like a local community working towards establishing systems for sustainable production, will hope to include pedologists or producers with knowledge in composting techniques in the collective he is forging.

Similarly, a potato farmers association wishing to improve the quality of its produce will hope to include partners who are knowledgeable about the causes of deterioration of quality along the supply chain and capable of defining indicators about such deterioration and of recommending actions to take to prevent or reduce it: harvesters, transporters, wholesalers, retailers, consumer organizations, and supply-chain economists.

Other skills can also be considered, such as the capacity to lead a collective or to play the role of interface or intermediary between the different types of actors involved (see Chapter 7, “Introducing action research rooted in partnership: the Unai project in Brazil,” page 97).

The individual or collective nature of skills and knowhow to be mobilized also needs to be examined. Is collaboration with competent, motivated, and locally established individuals, but who could be isolated, preferable to one with institutions who have the power to mobilize their members and who could convince other potential institutional partners to follow suit, but who could be deeply involved in institutional power games and politics? It is best to be pragmatic and to take case-by-case decisions without prejudging the possibilities and advantages of working with individuals on the one hand or institutions on the other.

History of relations between participants

To these criteria of representativeness, legitimacy, and skills of potential participants, we can add other less obvious aspects that may influence the selection of partners and the functioning of the future collective.

A prior relationship between stakeholders at the time of launching an ARP is one such aspect. A researcher already involved with a producer organization or a territorial community already being supported by an NGO are liable to let their trust and working connections with existing partners influence their ARP partnership choices, without explicitly considering the legitimacy, skill, or representativeness criteria.



No doubt, an existing connection facilitates dialog and team work, but it can also encourage a routine and be detrimental to the collective's ability to change and to open itself up to other partners.

▮ Relationships of power and influence

It is important, as we mentioned already, to understand the actual power games, lobbying efforts, and public displays of and by the various stakeholders (see Chapter 4, "An unpredictable course," page 49). Stakeholders who find out about an ARP project and then proclaim themselves as essential or important to it are not always the most competent or legitimate.

And yet, excluding them may be impossible due to their sociopolitical position or influence. In addition, political or institutional interplay at the national level may work against local dynamics and could affect the composition of the collective or even the issues to address. One way of dealing with this thorny issue is to discuss the choices to be made very openly within the collective.

▮ Differing motivations

Detecting stakeholder motivations and justifications is also important. The motivations explicitly expressed by the partners very often relate to the collective good. For example, the researcher wants to resolve an issue for the benefit of all participants. The representative of a producer group or of local government wants to help improve the quality of life of its members or fellow-citizens, respectively.

However, this may not be enough: unstated motivations are also essential aspects of a partner's involvement. Ostensibly, a representative of a producer organization may want to participate in an ARP approach as a person capable of establishing ties with public institutions, but his real motivation may be that such a collaboration would benefit his organization. Similarly, a researcher wanting to conduct his own research on a topic unrelated to local requirements could express his willingness to help resolve the problem confronting his farmer partners so as to be accepted and welcomed in a given rural setting (see Chapter 7, "Introducing action research rooted in partnership: the Unai project in Brazil," page 97).

Such situations of reciprocal instrumentalization by different stakeholders are fairly common (see Box 1, "Tensions in an action-research partnership and risks of derailment," page 46). Detecting them and taking them into consideration for analyzing their positioning is



important, even if it takes time to do so. Note that true motivation is only revealed “in action” when stakeholders actually participate in ARP activities (see Chapter 4, “An unpredictable course,” page 49).

▮ Taking the plunge

This first phase of identifying partners and building the initial collective is essential because on it will depend in part the dynamics of the ARP to come. Future failures of the ARP may be avoided if sufficient care is taken during this phase.

Nevertheless, a collective is built by negotiation and is based on interests and strategies of all parties. It is never going to be perfect. Do not wait indefinitely for an “ideal” collective to form before initiating exchanges or starting more concrete work. Its relevance and operational suitability can only be revealed by action and effective collaboration.

The collective’s first steps

The launch phase, in particular the discussion on the problem to be addressed, is an essential stage for building a sense of collective action. It influences group cohesion and the level of involvement of the partners. It is a progressive and iterative process, sometimes time-consuming, conducted simultaneously with the building of a common language (see below).

▮ Taking the time to know each other

ARP approaches normally bring together individual or institutional stakeholders with different functions, cultural backgrounds, and language styles. In some rural environments with low levels of literacy or weak institutional structures, putting together a functional collective may take as long as six months, even a year.

In fact, ARP goals and approaches, especially when proposed by researchers, are not easily understood by rural producers and organizations used to the normal top-down and prescriptive functioning of research or extension institutions. In addition, since researchers are normally used to less interactive ways of working with stakeholders, these approaches require them also to change their way of thinking and their methods of working.

The first stages on the ground are therefore of progressive discovery, both of the approach and of each other. It is often found necessary to



stop talking and move on to more concrete activities so that members of the collective experience first hand the implications and practical results of this type of approach.

▮ Listening to each other and building a common language

Building a common language and establishing some degree of trust is therefore almost always an indispensable first step. It helps lay the groundwork for a constructive dialog. To prevent misunderstandings, all participants must first identify and share common concepts which are going to be used in the ARP approach. In addition, certain common ethical values have to be shared by the partners. Or, at the very least, each partner should sufficiently be aware of the values of other partners so that he is in a position to detect and understand varied interpretations that one partner or another may bring to certain statements.

Hence the importance of the ability to listen sensitively and of the constant effort to place oneself in the others' shoes with an understanding attitude (Barbier, 1996). Each stakeholder strives to express his or her ideas and proposals in terms that can be understood by all participants, to pay genuine attention to others' projects and viewpoints, and to recognize their abilities and knowledge.

If certain stakeholders are too far apart culturally or if the language barrier is especially high, it may be necessary to plan for and allot time to bidirectional translations. Some stakeholders are always best at ease in their mother tongues. This translation can lead to the reformulation of statements by a third party (a facilitator) or to the creation of words capturing new concepts.

Translation, though, can have its own difficulties. For example, how to translate "cash" in Dioula or "farm enterprise" in Fulfulde? What significance to assign to the concept of gross profit per hectare when the farmers think instead in terms of production and cash?

Terms as common as "crop yield" may mean different things to different stakeholders. The agronomist measures the yield of a crop in kilos per hectare whereas the farmer may think of it in terms of kilos of crop harvested per kilo of seeds used or the number of tubers obtained by size category.

Some farmers understand the concept of democratic collective decision making as the decisions taken by the elders and community



seniors, rather than one requiring the consent of all social groups, including the marginal, in the community.

▮ Facilitating dialog

In addition to these aspects of communication, the building of trust and mutual understanding is achieved by simple actions, choices, and gestures which indicate one's reaction to the other's habits and behavior or which indicate a desire to share or to collaborate closely. Very often, these acts and deeds say more and are better understood than words.

Thus, for example, in a situation where a researcher is initiating an ARP approach, visiting the fields with the farmer with whom he or she wants to work, offering and sharing a meal, or respecting the moment of prayer that, in certain cultures, starts off a meeting, are all significant gestures.

Similarly, a meeting in the researcher's air-conditioned conference room, in the municipal building of the elected official with the photo of the current president on the wall, or below a village's palaver tree, and communicating respectively with a video-projector, a blackboard, or a sketch drawn on the loose soil of a cowshed, do not represent insignificant, anecdotal, or circumstantial choices. Such choices influence the ease of expression of each type of stakeholder and can help a participant feel comfortable and at home in an emerging collective.

▮ Launching the first activities

By quickly starting actual activities, we can help reassure the various partners of the approach's expected effectiveness. It is thus best to initiate the process by formulating well-defined and already-proven proposals or ones that will be tested at limited demonstrative scales.

However, a paradoxical situation can arise when it is the researchers doing the proposing. On the one hand, they have to advance proposals that enhance their credibility with the partners but, on the other, a failure will threaten the loss of that same credibility, irrespective of the reasons of the failure. The stakeholders may lose interest, thus impacting negatively the dynamics of the collective action.

Collective frustration, or even conflict between partners, can result if their respective expectations don't match, or when results are delayed or are not of the type expected. Obviously, these are not desirable situations, but they are no strangers in an ARP process. It is during



the evaluation stage that these situations should be carefully analyzed and solutions found for a continuation and improvement of collective action.