



7. Introducing ARP rooted in partnership: the Unai project in Brazil

*É. Sabourin, B. Triomphe, H. Hocdé, J.-H. Valadares Xavier,
M. Nascimento de Oliveira*

Using the example of the Unai project in Brazil, this chapter examines the transition from a conventional participatory development-research approach to an ARP-based one, relying on an already established solid partnership.

Context and issues

Unai is a large *município* (district) of 8500 km² in north-western Minas Gerais state (175 km from the federal capital, Brasília) and part of the Cerrado region. It is marked by an inequality in the access to land: 65% of farms are family owned but they occupy only 13% of the cultivated area. Family farms resulting from agrarian reforms are the most precarious: low-fertility soils, lack of outreach and extension programs, difficult access to credit.

The main produce of these family farms is milk. Most of the newer farms are undertaking measures to increase milk production: improvement of pastures and fodder systems, acquisition of better animal stock, and installation of chilling tanks. The main crop in the area, maize, suffers from problems of soil preparation, seed quality, and control of weeds, but it exhibits great potential including as a fodder resource (silage).

It is in this context that Embrapa and the University of Brasília (UnB) launched a participatory development-research project in 2002. Its aim was to provide support to family farms created from agrarian reform. Cirad became involved in the project in 2004. The project concentrated on four major axes:

- Developing technical-economic references on production systems;
- Promoting the insertion of farms into markets;
- Building the capacities of farmer associations;
- Training young rural agents of development originating from agrarian reform.



Stakeholders and origin of the approach

The UnB-Embrapa research team first entered into a partnership with farmer associations in three settlements of agrarian reforms and their district union which was very active in the struggle for land reform. It also entered into separate agreements with the Minas Gerais Company for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension and the Unai Agricultural School.

Based on participatory diagnosis and formulation of action plans negotiated with each association, this approach relied above all on the resolve of the researchers. It produced concrete results for the farmers: “Thanks to this research, we now know how to improve the quality of our milk.” Or, “With direct seeding, we can now plant maize or beans without the fear that there will be nothing to harvest.” But the amount of time researchers spent in supporting and participating in the farmers’ activities led to a reduction in their time for producing generic knowledge.

Other limitations came to the fore when farmer associations and local authorities asked researchers to change the scale of their intervention: to go from the original 3 settlements to encompass all 25 settlements in the Unai district. There were two primary concerns in this potential expansion:

- How to work with farmer associations and development agents to best meet the demands of the district union and the associations?
- How to structure an action-research approach which tackles innovation both in its technical aspects as well as in its organizational ones?

Reflections on the degree and type of involvement

These two questions formed the starting point for reflections on how the ARP approach could make useful contributions without actually trying to recast the entire Unai project around it.

In reflecting about ARP, research topics and questions were identified for which researchers considered that contributions from farmers and agents of development would not only be useful but even crucial in resolving problems identified during the earlier diagnoses.

On the face of it, a strengthened partnership should have helped save time, arrive at results most suited to both the diverse and specific



conditions reigning in the area under study, and facilitate local appropriation in view of the proposed change in scale (learning, training, information, and disclosure).

Finally, the requirements proposed under the ARP framework of formalizing the partnership and clarifying the approach seemed to offer the benefit of helping to clarify the roles of different partners and to empower the local stakeholders, in particular the farmers and their associations. “These researchers take the time to explain their methods, even practically, to us. Those earlier ones wouldn’t even get out of their vehicles.... These explain everything to us.” “One day the project will conclude. For some of us it will be more difficult than for others. But we will be able to progress even without the researchers.”

The ARP’s place in the project was gradually defined, and an “ARP collective” constructed, via four workshops centered on exchanges of experiences and methodological training in the principles of action research. The first was held in end-2005, the last in mid-2007.

The first one, at the end of 2005, brought together researchers from Embrapa, Cirad, and UnB; and teachers from UnB and the Unai agricultural school. It focused on the need of formalizing and structuring the partnership and on the necessity of helping farmers become true interlocutors. The ARP approach and its monitoring methods were then tested for setting up new activities related to direct seeding, a new type of cropping systems being developed within the framework of the Unai project.

The second workshop, in May 2006, brought together representatives from 15 village associations and the Unai district farmers’ union; and the research and teacher teams. The farmers made two key requests: getting proper access to technical support and extension, and insertion into markets: “All these diagnoses are all well and good, but something practical has to come out of them; we need technical support. We are quite capable of production. The big problem is of selling our produce.”

These requests led to a series of joint actions by mixed commissions consisting of farmers, researchers, and trainee technicians: monitoring and negotiation of the price of milk and the setting up of a team of technicians embedded with the farmers’ union.

The third workshop, at the end of 2006, was focused on the articulation of the activities of the researchers and those of the young technicians



originating from the settlements. Responding to the needs of the local organizations, these technicians were in a position to form technical assistance teams and even to expand their activities beyond their immediate environment and change the scale of their intervention.

The final workshop, in June 2007, brought together farmers, technicians, and researchers to analyze the functioning of thematic groups (focus groups) which had been formed in earlier years on different issues (milk, direct-seeding, processing and marketing of indigenous fruits) and to capitalize on the critical evaluation of the various experiences. It helped deepen the understanding of key ARP concepts (empowering, formalizing, imparting autonomy) and to incorporate them into these focus groups.

These workshops were complemented and supported by various training and information sessions on the management of direct-seeding cropping systems. These sessions were organized every year and included field visits, technical demonstrations, reciprocal visits to farmers' experiments, and external study tours. "For a farmer, grand theories mean little, but when we see things implemented in the field and can discuss them with other farmers and technicians, then we understand much faster."

Activities conducted as part of action research in partnership

Reflections carried out on the ARP led to the introduction of new activities into the project:

- Construction of questions that were common to researchers, technicians, and farmers, mainly on direct-seeding systems, but also on the marketing of milk, technical support and assistance, and other topics;
- Organizing discussion sessions on the character and evolution of the partnership and on each partner's specific role, especially as relating to experimental set-ups on direct seeding and to focus groups on "direct seeding" and "promotion of local fruits."
- Establishing an experimental network for direct seeding. It consisted of on-farm and on-station trials and revolved around the setting up and monitoring of three "direct-seeding" focus groups;
- Reflexive analysis of research-development approaches and methods based on observations and interviews.



Some results obtained

Reflecting on the partnership helped participants make the distinction between partner institutions (research, farmer associations, agricultural school) and institutions that collaborated only when necessary (extension service, district government, milk cooperative, Unai technical faculty). It also helped clarify the allocation of roles, division of responsibilities, and the decision making process.

Its most direct impact was that it clarified the roles and functions of researchers in their interaction with the other stakeholders. Consequently, today researchers are conscious of maintaining the necessary and difficult balance between knowledge creation and involvement in action. They recognize that they can no longer play the multiple roles they did in the initial project phase.

Asymmetries also started to be reduced. Researchers had enjoyed, from the very beginning, the upper hand in managerial matters and in financing the various activities. They were thus rule makers, for example, deciding who could call meetings and who would manage them. It was only natural for farmers to consider them decision makers (“the powerful ones”) and the source of information and services.

Goodwill alone does not overturn easily established routines. Nor is it easy to reduce and then reverse a fundamental asymmetry by introducing concepts and practices of a more balanced partnership and assigning responsibility and granting independence to the other actors – farmers and agents of development. A tremendous effort is required to socialize objectives and methods, as well as to adopt transparent and negotiated mechanisms to divide work and responsibility.

The four-step training helped reduce asymmetries. Bringing together widely disparate stakeholders for training helped construct a viable partnership. In addition, these specific training sessions helped build the capacities of the weakest stakeholders, the farmers and young technicians, so that they were better prepared to interact with other stakeholders, be they politicians, technical and administrative services, cooperatives, or businesses. But progress on these various fronts was only achieved up to a point. “Amongst us, we are not shy to speak up. But in front of technicians and politicians, we aren’t open our mouths.” Also imparting training step- and topic-wise requires a multiplication of training events.



Thanks partly to ARP, researchers adapted the work calendar as best as they could to the farmers' schedules. Some researchers did not want to or could not work on Saturdays and Sundays, even though those were the days often selected for meetings of farmer associations, for holding local markets, and other events. Farmers, on their side, were not always available to meet researchers and were afraid of losing too much time in meetings.

A compromise was found to arrange meetings at noon or in the early afternoon, after the lunch break and during the hottest period of the day. Some activities, such as field trips or meetings with all members of the associations were scheduled specifically over the weekend to allow the maximum number of farmers to attend.

The researcher-farmer dialog and the work methodology relating to direct-seeding cropping systems were reviewed. Farmers and researchers validated several different types of technical references coming out of the experiments. Tests in farmers' fields were complemented by tests in controlled environments at the agricultural school, by reciprocal visits, by thematic training, and by monitoring and evaluation which led to collective back reporting with the members of focus groups or the community.

Some routine activities implemented in earlier stages, like the monthly monitoring of a network of reference farms, were gradually eliminated. This freed up time for monitoring experiments and thematic focus groups. The existence of focus groups as merely practical contact groups for meetings called and organized by the researchers was seriously called into question.

Efforts invested in reflexivity about the approach helped show the limitations of the existing set-up, in particular the limits of participatory methods, poorly understood or perceived by the farmers. They helped redefine the modalities of training and to suspend, for the time being, the plan to expand the approach to the entire Unai district until the various stakeholders, researchers included, were truly ready to tackle such a scale.

Summary

The Unai project is a good example of a situation where research intent met the will to change. Highly committed researchers saw how they could make their profession more effective and meaningful if



they modified their roles to fit the three ARP objectives: resolving problems, generating knowledge, building autonomy.

The sequence of progressive training sessions played a key role in transiting from a development-research approach to that of an ARP. Self-analysis of project stakeholders' practices, of the processes for co-building set-ups and activities, and of the results, along with theoretical inputs on action research, helped facilitate the sharing of knowledge while developing team cohesion around shared principles and values.

Whenever necessary, facilitators did not hesitate to shake the local stakeholders or to push researchers out of their scientific entrenchments. Such a contribution was particularly significant. Facilitators insisted on the different visions of each group: "What does direct seeding mean for you?" or "What, according to you, constitutes a good focus group?" They drew up possible scenarios and simulated the ARP's method of functioning out of everyday professional situations.

Deceptively simple questions powered the dynamics. For example: "Why are we organized in this manner?" or "How do the experiments we are conducting or the negotiation strategy we are implementing to improve the quality and price of milk contribute to empowering farmers or modifying their usual role?"

Finally, the planning and conduct of the training sessions in full partnership also contributed significantly to this transition.

Four verbs describe succinctly the takeaways from the use of ARP in the Unai project: empower, formalize, define the roles, negotiate.



Conclusion

Building the ARP collective is a critical stage. It is closely interlinked with the collective construction of the problem set and impacts the collective's ability to resolve it. An ARP project's proponents, whether they be researchers or not, have to enroll individuals and institutions.

While it is normal to take the representativeness, legitimacy, and expertise of the participating stakeholders into account, it is strategically important to also consider the pre-existing relationships between them, their power relationships and alliances, and explicit or hidden motivations – to the extent that these can be deciphered at this early stage.

Building a collective takes time and the ability to listen. It also requires measures to facilitate dialog and to kick start the first concrete actions.

The functioning of an ARP collective shows that partners must share a minimum level of values while recognizing differences that may exist between them. It is also important that asymmetries relating to material or non-material resources, in particular between social groups on the one hand, and between researchers and the other stakeholders on the other, be managed by building trust, relying on explicit rules, and by mobilizing acknowledged mediators.

The researcher has a unique place in an ARP. He or she is often one of the initiative takers of the ARP project and participates actively in defining its problem-set. Sometimes, researchers will even manage the process itself. He or she will have to make a special effort to maintain a balance between involvement in the activities with stakeholders – reflecting a proximity to some of them, or even at times a connivance – and the detachment necessary to dispassionately analyze the processes in progress and to formalize rigorous results.

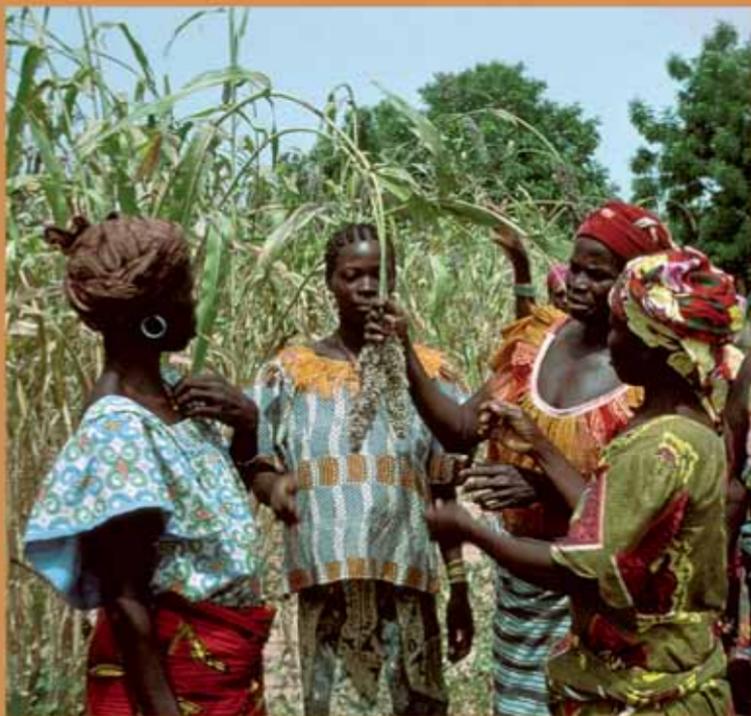
Researchers do not necessarily, by themselves, think of explaining their motivations to the rest of the collective; they have to make an effort to do so. Finally, difficulties may arise and tensions may be provoked as some research hypotheses are not always shared or as publication of results in articles have not been sufficiently discussed beforehand.



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The Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA) is a joint international institution of the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) Group of States and the European Union (EU). Its mission is to advance food and nutritional security, increase prosperity and encourage sound natural resource management in ACP countries. It provides access to information and knowledge, facilitates policy dialogue and strengthens the capacity of agricultural and rural development institutions and communities. CTA operates under the framework of the Cotonou Agreement and is funded by the EU. For more information on CTA, visit www.cta.int

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