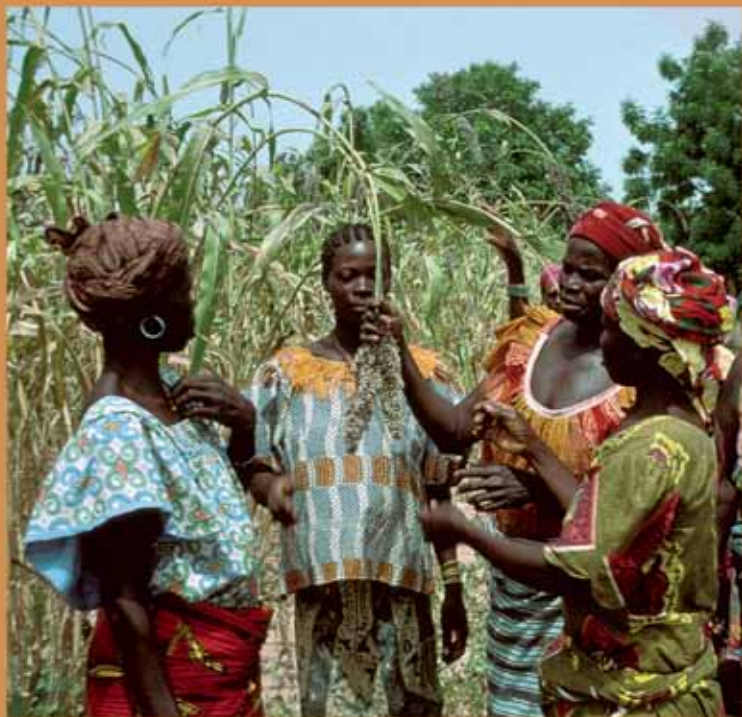# Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world

Action research in partnership

G. Faure, P. Gasselin, B. Triomphe,
L. Temple, H. Hocdé – SCIENTIFIC EDITORS

10. Managing collectives

H. Hocdé and G. Faure

Management and communications remain essential functions in an ARP approach, irrespective of the number of available tools, the range of set-ups cooperatively developed, and the diversity of the concerned collectives.

This observation is true for all ARP stages, from the exploratory phase to the implementation phase to the disengagement phase (see Part 2). Relationships between ARP stakeholders can be managed by what some would consider routine activities: meetings, interviews, planning, analyses, and back reporting.

But holding meetings with heterogeneous participants, interviews with an individual or group, participatory planning, and presenting results all require specific management and communications skills by the ARP initiative takers.

Managing communications

The first point is to become aware of the large number of instances of non- or inadequate communications during research experiences involving diverse stakeholders, and of their unfortunate consequences. The telling anecdote in Box 15 illustrates this common difficulty in communicating. More importantly, it draws attention to the possible risks we run when we do not ensure mutual understanding.

Optimized functioning of an ARP collective is conditional upon a good and effective flow of information. Communication requires patience and a collective ability to listen; it consumes time – but it is time well spent. And yet, experience shows that communication skills are not the strong point of the majority of ARP researchers and practitioners.

Effective communications and information flow have four specific goals:
– To know and understand each other, and to get recognition from the others. The stakeholders thus learn to understand their differences, exchange ideas, create new knowledge and skills, and draw up proposals. Meaningful communications and a smooth flow of information helps valorize each participant in the eyes of the others and thus builds

> **Box 15. Communications surprise!**
> *M. Vaksmann*
>
> One day in 1999, a sorghum breeder participated in a survey of local varieties in Mali. At day's end, he was talking with the farmer who participated in the survey and who had invited him home. The researcher mentioned something that amazed him, a strange contradiction: farmers were growing tall sorghum with small panicles, whereas research wanted to create a short sorghum with large panicles. The farmer responded by telling him that he did indeed have this type of sorghum, and invited the breeder to have a look at this his grain store and – and to help himself to it.
>
> But it is the subsequent statement he made that is truly revelatory: "The problem is that you researchers do not try to explain to us what you want so it becomes difficult for us to work with you." The researcher never forgot this complaint. It fundamentally changed his research perspective: it strengthened his resolve to combine selection criteria, some originating with farmers and others with researchers. Until this episode, the researcher considered it impossible to combine criteria in this way.
>
> As shown by this example, sophisticated communications tools are not necessarily required, it can be just a matter of simple means to verify that each one understands the other, that all are aware of the common goal. "*Afamouna* (it's understood)," say some Malian facilitators.

trust (see Chapter 7, "Introducing action research rooted in partner-ship: the Unai project in Brazil," page 97);

– To keep partners and stakeholders updated on the activities in progress. It is obvious that external partners need to be kept informed but it is also frequently observed that many stakeholders of an ARP project have only a partial picture of the overall project. Keeping them updated as well helps limit misunderstandings and avoid confusion and even disinformation. Information transparency is therefore a key partnership requirement;

– To facilitate the execution and monitoring of the planned tasks. Once again, this may seem self-evident and yet, shortcomings here are very often due to a lack of sufficient will to ensure a smooth flow of information rather than to any lack of communications tools or difficulties in using them. When ARP initiative takers expressly become aware of this issue, they quite easily find modalities of application for information sharing;

– To shed light on decision making. To be able to take strategic or operational decisions, stakeholders need to possess the basic information on the context, possible choices, room for maneuver, consequences of various decisions, etc.

We distinguish between two communication levels: communications between individuals belonging to different worlds and communications between members of the same world (the world of researchers, the world of technicians, the world of the farmers). Each of these levels may require specific contents or type of communications.

In most cases, the conventional communications tools can be employed successfully: regular meetings of committees, workgroups, etc.; organization of specific events such as back-reporting of results or a lecture-discussion on a particular topic; sending out of a regular thematic or general newsletter,; or even the use of traditional media, especially radio.

Managers and facilitators of ARP projects, should organize an information-flow system that, at the very minimum, should ensure distribution and archiving:
– Of meeting and workshop reports or details of decisions taken;
– Of validated work plans;
– Of reports and articles produced within the framework of the ARP;
– Of technical, educational, and other relevant documents.

It is also possible to rely upon modern techniques and tools such as:
– Digital video to present noteworthy aspects of the ARP, such as results and testimonials;
– The Internet for wider distribution of action-research findings, facilitating access to useful information, getting in touch with other stakeholders, etc.;
– An intranet to share knowledge and techniques, share work schedules, participate in discussion forums, receive and send alert messages, keep tabs on what is happening in the project, link to other resources;
– Electronic forums such as Wiki sites managed and built by the stakeholders.

Leadership and mediation functions

An ARP project's initiators, whether researchers or non-researchers, can make use of specific tools to facilitate and stimulate stakeholder interactions. This helps puts into action the ARP's key principles, among which: reducing asymmetries, helping the most underprivileged to speak up, delegating responsibilities between stakeholders, and encouraging the taking of initiatives.

❚▶ Meetings

The facilitators of an ARP project's have to lead and manage work-groups which may consist of stakeholders from different backgrounds, with different professional goals and perspectives. They have to organize and manage different types of meetings and workshops (awareness creation, informational, presentation, closing events, etc.). For such meetings to be successful, it is necessary to invest time, energy, and money for each of the three stages: before, during, and after the event.

The preparation of the event consists of:
– Defining goals and identifying participants;
– Organizing the logistics;
– Clarifying the process (or the dynamics) that will be proposed, consistent with the project goals and depending on the existing and known relationships between would-be participants and the pool of skills that will be assembled.

During the event, the facilitators have to:
– Welcome and introduce participants;
– Present progress achieved so far and the event's agenda;
– Present results, form discussion groups, report back in plenary session;
– Sum up the discussions and the decisions taken, and list unresolved points;
– Assess the meeting and thank participants.

After the event, it is important to:
– Evaluate the outcome;
– Follow up on decisions taken.

For effective management of a meeting, i.e., so that each individual feels like a real participant, use of visual techniques is often desirable. These techniques help encourage wider participation and minimize misunderstandings. In addition, problems of translation which can arise in purely verbal communications are avoided.

Visual techniques can be applied to each ARP stage (initial diagnosis, planning, presentation of findings, etc.), both with homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. One of the most common ones is based on the use of index cards (Salas *et al*., 1993), a technique that is especially useful in brainstorming sessions and when participation by all is deemed necessary.

To generate new ideas in a group, a facilitator can ask each participant to note down one or two ideas in the form of a short sentence on an index card. The cards are then pinned to a board, grouped by theme, with the possible help of the participants. This imparts a structure to the brainstorming. The facilitator can also summarize the main ideas that the participants put down on the cards.

These cards can be moved around during the workshop depending on the way the debate progresses. In this way, the participants can "see" their own thoughts and views. By preserving the various boards on the wall, the group gets to see the evolution of their opinion, beliefs, analyses, and decisions.

Several variants of this technique exist. Cards of different colors can be used for an easier classification by topic or by type of stakeholder. They can be anonymous or not, depending on the issue at hand.

Note that experience is required for mastering the use of these tools. In addition to learning while doing, specific training sessions may be necessary on some occasions. It is recommended that those new to this field take advantage of them.

A meeting need not be sterile and lifeless; it can be part of an educational strategy, as shown in Box 16.

Box 16. Organizing the reporting back of results

Let us imagine that, in the context of an ARP project, the time has come to present findings and results obtained over the past months to various project partners and allies, for example, the findings of an experimentation cycle on new cropping techniques conducted with the farmers. The facilitator responsible for this presentation has to decide how to conduct the presentation.

Should she handle the different points, i.e., the problem-set, issues, questions, material and methods, results, discussions, and conclusions, in a fixed order irrespective of the audience? Or should she broach them in a different order depending on the participants, by assigning greater weight and importance to those points that will interest or concern the various participants?

For example, the facilitator may choose to start with the expectations and concerns of the participants, and then select those specific messages that will let her enter their world and get their attention. She can also choose not to put herself in their shoes and present topics in the way she deems best, letting the participants relate to her approach. Another facilitaor might opt to combine both approaches – the structured and the targeted – on the spot.

...

...

> The meeting will be more effective if the facilitator uses written and visual media such as photos, graphics, objects, posters, models, and drawings, in spite of their cost and the time it will take to make them. This can be particularly useful in situations where use of the local language is required or when illiteracy levels are high.
>
> The basic principle always remains the same when choosing visual or other aids: What will make sense for the participating stakeholders? What will speak to them? What will hold their interest? What will help valorize the communications systems and methods that the stakeholders use in front of other stakeholders, such as researchers (stories, radio, tom-tom, sociodrama)? Here too, the ARP initiators have an obligation to rely on proven experience from experts in the field.

▮▷ Exchanges between stakeholders

Exchanges between stakeholders (for example, reciprocal visits between farmers and technicians from different villages) are an effective way of transmitting information. They can also be learning experiences when they are designed properly as part of an overall strategy.

Here too, there are many ways of organizing such exchanges. Technicians or researchers can take charge of them or they can strive to make farmers take their share of responsibility. Visits can involve only farmers or become occasions to further relationships between farmers, researchers, and technicians.

As an example, let us take the case of structured visits between farmer-experimenters such as mentioned in the Guatemalan example (see Box 12 "The "Superación" farmer-experimenter local committee," page 124). Farmers exhibited great interest in this modality of learning and of sharing information, much in the same way that researchers do for conferences and seminars.

Exchanges between farmer-experimenters can be conducted at several levels: within a locality, a region, a country, or across several countries. They can be of various durations, from day-visits to those lasting up to a week. They can take several forms: small- or large-group visits; visits limited to test plots or also focusing on the farms where the tests are being conducted; exchanges conducted indoors, around animal herds, or around a particular plot; or exchanges between project participants or widened to the farmers' families with possible accommodation of visitors for a few nights in the homes of the host families.

Even though any exchange is usually beneficial, it must be kept in mind that organizing it will have significant costs for the ARP collective in terms of time, money, resources, and effort. So it is incumbent upon the organizers to optimize the benefits derived from such encounters. It is worth keeping some rules and guidelines in mind towards this end, as illustrated in Box 17.

Box 17. Preparing for a farmers' visit
B. Miranda Abaunza, H. Hocdé
Organizing a meeting requires a three-stage preparation: before, during, and after. Each of these stages has its own goals and rules and should be prepared with care, in line with the following guidelines:

Before the visit
Who will participate in the meeting? How to choose participants (or how do they choose themselves)? What do we hope to achieve with this visit? Can visitors be given some information in advance about the location and context of the meeting? How should the meeting be organized? What skills or knowhow can the visitors bring to their hosts? What will the visitors be able to do back at their farms with the information they will acquire during the visit?

During the visit
A successful visit consists of three parts. The first is for seeing, listening, sensing, and conversing. The second is for systemizing what has been observed, seen, and spoken about. Finally, the third is for debating, discussing, and other interactions between hosts and visitors.

The first part is the longest. By far, it is the part during which the participants are most lively and show greatest interest. It is more difficult to set aside some time at the end of the corresponding period(s) for the visitors to analyze and to systemize, amongst themselves, their observations, doubts, and even the recommendations they can make to their hosts. Eventually, the visitors present back to the hosts these recommendations and comments, usually leading to a productive debate between the two sides. This part of the meeting is the most difficult to hold; time is usually running out and participants are tired.

Interaction between visitors and hosts is usually most animated and productive if there is a cultural aspect to the visit in addition to the purely technical ones (songs, music, poetry, story telling, festivals, local cuisine, regional history, etc.).

After the visit
On their return, the visitors may talk about this visit to their families and neighbors. Without an explicit strategy or plan for conveying what was learnt during the visit, things generally end there.

...

With some forethought, however, the visitors can arrange reporting back sessions at various levels, for example, in the village or to groups. And, of course, they can use their normal communications networks to distribute information gained during their visit. In an ideal case, they will be able to incorporate some day some results and lessons learnt during the visit . In general, the visits have a cascading impact: first a change takes place in the visiting farmers' thinking. They are emboldened and more confident about their abilities, feel less isolated, and are more willing to commit themselves to the collective action. As a result, they increase their involvement within their groups, within the ARP project, or within activities of public institutions. This acts as a springboard for them to invest more in the ARP project and in other transformational projects.

Monitoring and understanding action research in partnership as it takes place

ARP practitioners may want to study the ARP process as it takes place for at least two reasons: for a better understanding of the dynamics at work and for helping manage and steer the ARP. Several tools are available to do so and they can be made an integral part of the monitoring and evaluation process (see Part 4).

Because researchers have the special role in an ARP of generating knowledge (see Chapter 7, "Reflections on the degree and type of involvement," page 97), it will be useful to plan discussions between researchers during the monitoring and evaluation process. These discussions should be in addition to, not in place of, discussions already planned and involving all stakeholders in the ARP's governance mechanisms.

Thus, at each significant event, such as a committee meeting, workshop, or presentation of findings, it may be very productive to analyze what transpired during the event. This will allow researchers to interpret stakeholder reactions, understand reasons for any bottlenecks, and anticipate possible consequences of a decision. The formalization of this reflexive process will greatly help in taking decisions pertaining to activities and in building a collective analysis of the dynamics at work.

A project log book is a good way of recording information about the functioning of the ARP, stakeholder reactions and behavior, salient facts in the project's life, and meetings and basic information about them (date, duration, participants, topics, results, decisions). Maintained by

researchers, sometimes with help from other stakeholders, a log book helps analyze, in real time, decisions and choices made at every ARP stage. It also helps retrospective analyses during evaluation phases. In addition, it is a great help for drafting project reports.

Summary

Without pretending to be exhaustive, this chapter has presented some examples of ARP governance and operational mechanisms. Some tools for facilitating interactions, encouraging contract agreements between stakeholders, assisting the decision-making process, facilitating the undertaking of activities, managing and leading, communicating, and mediating have also been presented.

This chapter has drawn attention to the vital role of communication, the flow of information, and the facilitation of the collective. At the risk of repeating ourselves, it also highlighted the crucial need, when designing mechanisms and tools, to include a reflexive analysis of their performance.

No standard blueprints, no recipes, and no single way of proceeding: this leitmotif is not meant to discourage those wishing to undertake an ARP, but to encourage them to use their ingenuity in proceeding forward and to remind them that all has not been invented yet.

Finally, everything is a source of learning, as we have seen throughout this chapter. But it is the formalization of this learning that leads to a qualitative leap, valorizes the lessons learnt, and helps achieve the aims of a true ARP.