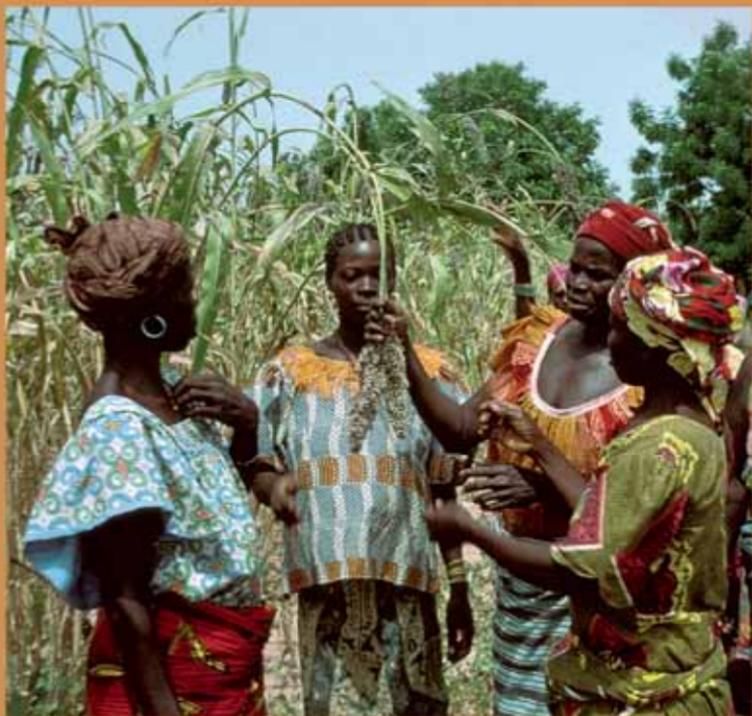




Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world

Action research in partnership

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15. Funding an action research in partnership: strategies and practices

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What is special about budgeting for an action research in partnership (ARP)? How to finance an ARP? These questions are not only practical but also have a strategic dimension: a lack or shortfall of funding or an improperly thought out approach to funding can imperil the smooth progress of an ARP.

Specific expenses to consider

An ARP's budget includes conventional items and items specific to it. The conventional expenses include the costs directly related to the activities such as those of surveys, experiments, personnel wages, transport, lodging, publication, administration, and management.

The specific costs concern activities and mechanisms of consultation and cooperation. These are major expense headings. In fact, the frequency of such activities depends on the number of partners involved in taking decisions or in the actions.

In practical terms, these are the expenses:

- Costs of negotiations relating to the design and construction of the project and the exploratory phase, involving meetings between the future project partners;
- Operating costs of the coordination, steering, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, which involve, amongst others, committee meetings at different governance levels (see Part 3) and field visits.

It is also recommended to plan funding for some stakeholders with limited resources, such as farmers or representatives of farmers' organizations and some extension and outreach services. This will allow them to, for example, participate in the project's steering mechanisms (see Box 28).



Box 28. The headache of daily allowances and other compensations

The issue of daily allowances and other financial compensation for ARP stakeholders for participating in various governance authorities and activities (steering, training, monitoring and evaluation, etc.) will quickly arise. A suitable solution will have to be found to avoid discontent and tensions. Left too long unresolved, this issue can threaten the ARP's ethical framework and derail its overall approach.

Unfortunately, there is no easy answer. Different ARP activities can give rise to different arrangements for levels of compensation (how much?) and allocation criteria (to who and for what?). These have to be based on negotiations conducted in steering committees and on the general context in which the collective is operating.

In any case, it is vitally important to estimate these costs in a realistic manner by distinguishing between budgetary provisions, conditional allocations which are only disbursed depending on certain rules, and definitive allocation of sums.

Workshops for reflexive analysis, for annual planning of activities, and for the presentation and discussion of results between the various partners also entail expenses.

Costs of internal communications to keep members of the ARP collective informed have also to be taken into account. As do external communications costs to keep partner institutions in particular and the external world in general up to date on ARP activities and results (see Part 3).

In many contexts, it can mean the acquisition and distribution of suitable communications tools, such as mobile phones to partners. Internet access may also have to be arranged.

Training costs have also to be taken into account (see Chapter 14, "Training for action research in partnership: strategies, content, and modalities"). Finally, some other expenses can also arise, for example, in connection with official registration of the groups or associations formed within the framework of the ARP approach, for protecting intellectual property, for creating a special fund for innovation, or for documenting participant experiences.

In general, it is a matter of anticipating and including in an ARP's budget all expenses consistent with the stated objectives and planned activities. It must not be forgotten, however, that every ARP is subject to substantial improvisation and adaptation along the way and these will all have budgetary implications (see Part 2).



Detailed and realistic identification of expenses is also essential because not all of them will necessarily be accepted by the funding entities at first glance. One must be prepared to defend such expenses and negotiate their acceptance one way or another.

Constructing a multi-source funding strategy

Funding an ARP approach of a certain duration requires a dynamic strategic vision of funding requirements. Sometimes, we are fortunate in finding a single funding entity, committed to supporting the approach over its entire duration. But more often, usually in view of the several successive cycles of the approach, financing arrangements have to be divided between various sponsors, funding agencies, and other mechanisms (see Part 2).

Three funding modalities are important to draw up a “necessary and sufficient” ARP budget: external funding, resources of the partner institutions, and, resources that can be mobilized by the participants.

▮ Working with a funding entity or agency

A funding entity or agency can be willing to finance an ARP project based on a normal call for development or research proposals or following an unsolicited application from the ARP proponents. The offer can also originate from the funding entity, directly addressed to the ARP proponents.

Limitations and modalities to be considered

Requests for funding an ARP approach encounter specific difficulties and challenges.

For one, funding entities normally finance projects of limited duration (from two to four years) whereas an ARP may take longer to bring about the institutional changes that may be part of its objectives.

One way of overcoming this limitation is to include – in the future – the establishment of mechanisms for ensuring the proper functioning the processes promoted by the ARP as part of the major project objectives. This allows the proponents to put objectives about short-term results in perspective: the latter are typically described in terms of number of beneficiaries, types of results, degree of adoption of innovations, etc., – and funding entities like to read about them in project-funding proposals. This makes it easy, when the time comes, to justify a request for a second phase of funding.



Many funding entities require a detailed schedule of activities over several years to be laid down, and even their exact expected impact (following the well-known logical framework approach), whereas an ARP approach by its very nature only takes firm shape as it goes along and depends on constant discussions and negotiations. Moreover, it is not unheard of for an ARP project to make mid-course corrections resulting from adjustments in its objectives or priorities decided upon by the participants.

A solution can be to present one or more likely scenarios spanning the entire duration, with the proviso that changes may take place and thus a certain flexibility is required in the planning. Another solution consists of emphasizing the objectives relating to the ARP process itself, such as capacity building or creation of partnerships between stakeholders.

Finally, it may be strategically important, before giving final shape to the project, to hold a multi-partner workshop on how to set the project up. The funding entity or other participating institutions will then have to be convinced to make resources available to finance it.

In fact, such a workshop will also help clarify the positions of some participants and it will help put negotiations and some aspects of co-construction which are essential to the project's success (including objectives, governance, and the distribution of roles, see Parts 2 and 3) on a sound footing.

It hardly needs saying that, in general, involving a funding entity in the design of the project will substantially improve an ARP team's chances of successful funding. It will also allow the funding entity's representatives to understand why an ARP approach is distinctive and how this translates into ways of functioning and of funding.

Conversely, it will allow the ARP project's proponents to find the most suitable ways of fitting the project into the funding entity's overall strategy or even enroll its representative(s) into the ARP collective.

Responding to a request for proposals

All field work requires funding, often obtained by responding to requests for proposals. Even though ARP approaches do not yet enjoy widespread recognition, it is fortunately becoming increasingly common for requests for proposals to be open to ARP approaches.



In such conditions, there are two challenges for the ARP proponents: identifying requests for proposals with terms of reference compatible with the exigencies and distinctiveness of an ARP and to get an idea of the funding entity's opinion of these types of approaches.

Some key words and phrases in the requests for proposals often indicate the acceptability of an ARP approach. Apart from direct mention of action research or intervention research, any reference to a requirement for a partnership between researchers and users or for implementing participatory approaches, or an invitation to propose responses based on user requirements, can be considered favorable indicators. The presence of these phrases does not, of course, guarantee the eligibility of an ARP project; it could be disqualified or passed over on other, more conventional, criteria.

It may be wise, at least in certain cases, to avoid emphasizing the ARP aspects of the proposed project. It is understandable that some funding entities are not keen on financing qualitative processes with vague evaluation criteria and with unpredictable future courses of action and results (see Parts 3 and 4).

The project proponents should not hesitate to contact the persons in charge of the request for proposals to better understand the spirit behind their request and their expectations and to ask their advice on the best way of presenting the ARP approach.

▮ Mobilizing multiple funding sources

With diversified funding sources, the project gains some financial autonomy. In this way, one funding entity can pay for expenses that another cannot, for example, when the latter's internal rules do not allow it to fund some sort of activity or expense, such as compensating an ARP partner. Work on the project can continue when funding from one source ends or if a funding entity unexpectedly stops or delays the funding.

Responding to multiple proposals

A common solution is to respond to several requests for proposals at the same time or as and when the need arises by asking each funding entity to be responsible for financing a clearly defined portion of the overall project.



It must not be forgotten, however, that the costs of managing a project with multi-source funding can rise very rapidly, most notably from the numerous reports that have to be submitted to the different authorities and the multiplicity of administrative, planning, and monitoring and evaluation requirements to meet.

Making good use of the partners' internal-financing abilities

Accessing co-funding from participating institutions is often an excellent strategy, especially when these institutions have their own funding systems. These funds can be used for the initial negotiations, organizing certain events before or during the project, making up budgetary shortfalls of the primary funding entities for certain expenses like expert consultations, a workshop, or a student-intern's stipend.

Some institutions, especially from the poorest countries, are clearly less able to fund such activities. Nevertheless, they are often in a position to assign their personnel, whose wages are already being paid, or to make available to the project other resources, for example, a vehicle bought on a different budget, an office, a laboratory, or simply a test plot.

The farmers themselves are often able to make in-kind contributions: their time, plots, animals, etc. However, we should not overestimate their ability to invest time and resources into a project, even an ARP project, without getting anything in return.

Finally, we should not ignore the possibility of some partners conducting activities which may help self-finance the project, even if there may be some difficulties in this approach. For example, a farmer organization may decide to plant a crop for commercial purposes and use the proceeds from sales to co-fund its participation in an ARP project.

Not only does co-funding have benefits for an ARP collective but it also encourages the appropriation of the approach by the project partners ("He who finances, participates!"). Co-funding also minimizes risks of dependence and of paternalism. The ability of the various stakeholders to contribute financially can also be taken as an indirect indicator of the potential for success of an ARP project.