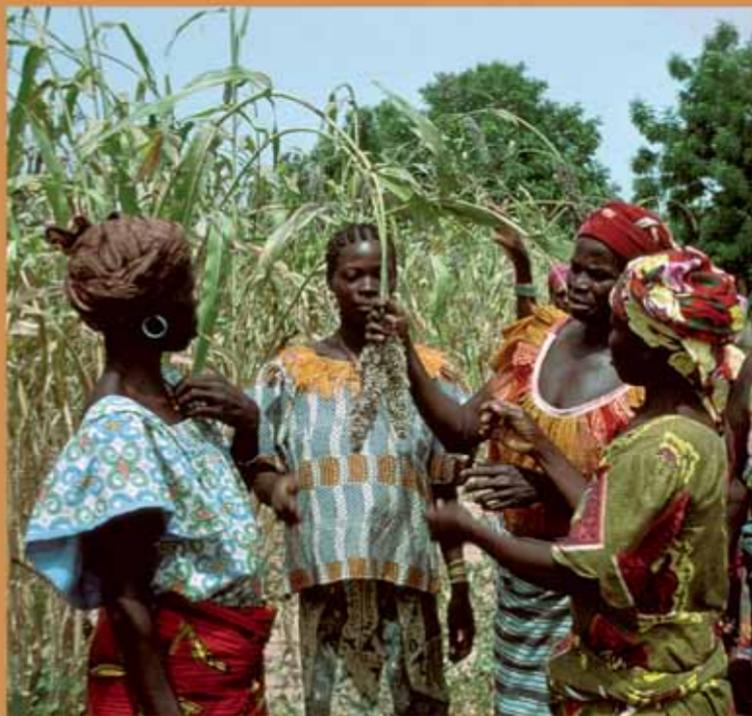# Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world

Action research in partnership

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heard, to express themselves clearly, and assert their convictions in a meeting that brings together different types of stakeholders.

Training and education (with specific modalities going beyond those of on-the-job learning processes, see Part 5, page 181) can play an important role in reducing these types of asymmetries, as Box 6 shows. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that asymmetries can even increase between ARP participants and non-participants or between those forming the inner core of the process and those on its periphery.

Box 6. A farmer university in north-east Brazil for co-constructing knowledge

J.-P. Tonneau and E. Coudel

The decentralization of public policies in Brazil has confirmed the immense need for skills and knowledge for local stakeholders to be real proponents of local and territorial development projects. Cirad, in partnership with the Federal University of Campina Grande and the Dom Helder Camara project, participated between 2003 and 2006 in coordinating a training programme for young rural residents in sustainable local development. The project, called Unicampo, was conducted in the semi-arid region of Cariri, Paraiba State, in the north-east of Brazil.

The challenge was to allow the stakeholders to valorize and strengthen their knowledge by organizing an exchange between local knowledge and university knowledge. This exchange took place via debates between participants, teachers, and researchers, made possible by the gradual building up of trust and respect. This training process – a sizeable investment – was part of a 12-month course for building human resources in a given area.

To promote real learning, the pedagogical process, inspired by Freire (1969), was structured around seven key questions: Who are we? What are our resources? What are our production systems? How to improve our situation? What are our projects? How to best implement them? How to manage them? The training consisted of classroom and practical sessions, valorization of the participants' knowledge, sharing of experiences, monitoring of the on-field implementation of the knowledge, etc.

These questions forced the stakeholders to question their own reality. They rediscovered it and then learnt to analyze it. In doing so, they gradually defined the projects that they wanted to implement in their communities and the manner of doing so, all the while affirming their identities and attempting to promote the use of local resources.

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> This type of training to build up stakeholder skills shakes up established habits by introducing a new way of looking at knowledge and its creation. The young people can then become true advocates in their communities: they are trained to better understand their environment and to participate in negotiations with influential or "important" actors.
>
> However, it must be admitted that going against traditional transmission structures, which generally are the source of power in public or private organizations, has a drawback. At the end of this training course, the young rural people have problems finding work in institutions entrusted with local and territorial development. Some are not even hired, being seen as potential "boat-rockers." Others are often frustrated by their inability to find the freedom of action necessary to pursue this approach within the organization.
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> We thus see the limitations of individual empowerment and responsibilization: territorial organizations also require transforming.

Managing tensions

An ARP is a demanding and disrupting process. At the practical level, it requires time, effort, and discussions between people who are not in the habit of talking to each other. In addition, it can call into question the participants' positions and public image. In fact, it asks frank questions, dismisses false evidence and ready-made truths, and uncovers hidden conflicts of interests.

◗ Managing information, a sensitive topic

An ARP produces validated information, hence difficult to contest, a benefit derived from following strict research procedures. This often modifies the power relationships between various stakeholders and organizations since information is an essential component of power. Its impact depends on the way it is disseminated, to whom, and at what time.

Researchers often find themselves confronted by the age-old dilemma: Should all truths be revealed? In our context: Should some research findings be held back, at least temporarily, in an effort to prevent a rise in tensions or to avoid drawing the ire of powerful people who can hamper or even block the process?

Another dilemma for the researchers: How should they handle the sensitive situation of a participant confiding in them on a confidential basis and revealing sensitive information, on his organization's political strategy, for example? Researchers can also "forget" to consult