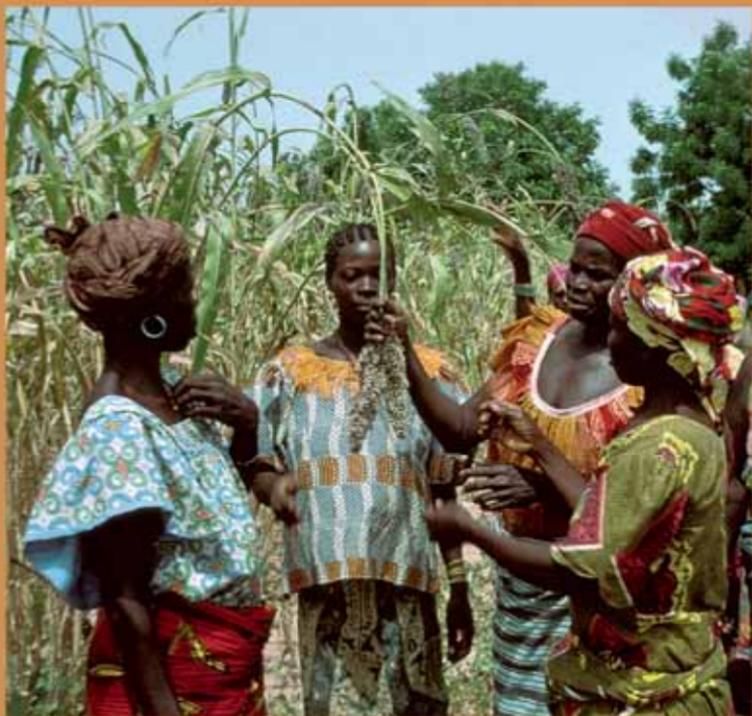# Innovating with rural stakeholders in the developing world

Action research in partnership

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8. Governance mechanisms

H. Hocdé and G. Faure

In this chapter, we discuss the general framework necessary for an ARP to be put into operation and show that specific decision-making mechanisms have to be implemented.

From stakeholder coordination to governance

How to make the various stakeholders work together throughout the various research stages? The answer to this question lies in an effective coordination: actively involving individuals and institutions, obtaining explicit commitments from all of them, and also ensuring that there is an equitable division between partners of responsibilities, access to resources (funding, infrastructure, and skills), expenses, benefits, and associated risks.

An effective coordination enables the stakeholders to:
– Explicitly state and acknowledge the diversity of individual viewpoints;
– Define goals, work plans, and the means to be used;
– Specify the expected results on three levels: resolution of the problem, creation of knowledge, building stakeholder autonomy;
– Organize the evaluation of results based on criteria defined by the stakeholders;
– Define the rules governing the ownership of the results obtained;
– Define each participant's responsibilities (tasks, participation level, etc.) and how they may evolve as the project progresses;
– Anticipate and plan for managing unexpected events, crises, and readjustments;
– Manage relations with those external to the project;
– Plan for the future, for example, by consolidating the ARP findings within institutions to ensure the process's sustainability.

That said, for an effective coordination, it is also necessary to establish decision-making mechanisms. Who decides what? All ARP actors have to agree on an arrangement for this, in other words, they have to decide on a governance mechanism for their research in partnership.

The term "governance" incorporates the phenomenon of a multiplicity of locations and actors involved in the decision-making process – in stark contrast to the conventional hierarchic process which originates with a single individual or higher authority and requires everyone's obedience. It comes down to putting in place adaptable management mechanisms based on the partnership among the various stakeholders.

Thus every participant of an ARP project is concerned by its governance, ranging from local stakeholders (farmers, farmer organizations, local institutions, spokespersons for local civil society) to institutional ones, operating at a larger scale (research, training/education, public sector, private operators, funding entities).

Defining an ethical framework

Because the ARP relies on values and attitudes, its governance naturally refers first of all to the concept of ethics. Defining an ethical framework for activities and involvement is therefore a priority. Ethics require us to ask what is good, what is bad, and how to conduct ourselves during our involvement in the project. What is ethical is specific to a given context, depends on what participants understand by "doing good," and the commitments they make to do so.

Some funding entities are increasingly insistent that the ethical dimension be also included in project proposals (see Chapter 15, "Constructing a multi-source funding strategy," page 197). It is at this time that the values shared by the participants and the rules that they decide on should be clarified as far as possible.

Box 9 presents the ethical commitments in ARP approaches conducted in Burkina Faso and Cameroon, expressed in the form of statements of intent.

Once applied, these ethical commitments become real and take very practical forms, as can be seen from an example from Brazil, see Box 10. The Brazilian research organization, Embrapa, and a farmer association (*Sindicato dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar de Anchieta*, Sintraf) spelled out, in the form of a ten-year contract, the rules for using a variety of maize created by the farmers and researchers in a participatory breeding project.

In other cases, it is the researchers alone who assume an ethical framework. Thus, a researcher network called ComMod (Companion Modeling), which develops computer models to help stakeholders

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Box 9. An example of ethical commitment (extract from a project document)
M. Dulcire
"At the start of our research activities in partnership, during the intervention phase, we commit to discussing and building an ethical framework with our partners for our involvement, both for the 'means as well as the ends.' This relates to: (1) each participant's role, (2) use of data, (3) publication or presentations at meetings, seminars, etc. of documents concerning the experience, (4) back reporting of results to partners, (5) valorization of results obtained by citing the concerned and involved stakeholders, and (6) withdrawal of researcher teams at the conclusion of the program."

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take decisions (Étienne, 2011), lays down four ethical principles in its charter. Firstly, the researcher has to involve himself in supporting the processes undertaken by non-researchers by using research findings. Secondly, research hypotheses and procedures for conducting research should be completely transparent. Thirdly, the scope of application of any model developed should be clearly defined. And, lastly, the proposed approach should constantly be evaluated and questioned with a view of improving it.

The ComMod network thought this charter necessary to guard against the risk, conscious or unconscious, of the instrumentalization of research or even of manipulation of the decision-making process. In this way, situations which may be considered undesirable by the stakeholders are avoided.

Box 10. Material transfer agreement between Sintraf and Embrapa
A. Toledo Machado
Sintraf will transfer genetic materials to Embrapa without guaranteeing their purity or quality.
Embrapa:
– Undertakes it will never claim intellectual property rights on all or part of these materials;
– Assumes legal responsibility for all losses, if any, caused by these materials;
– Undertakes to inform Sintraf if any harmful effect of these materials is detected;
– Undertakes to mention Sintraf by name in any publication relating to these materials.

Signature Sintraf   Signature Embrapa

Implementing ethical intentions is almost always more difficult than declaring them, including when ARP results have to be published after a project has been concluded. If the ARP researcher-practitioners did not hold timely discussions with the other stakeholders on the modalities of publishing and communicating the findings, their declared intentions may remain mere noble words.

To summarize: the challenge lies as much in implementing ethical principles as in defining them. Only when both are dealt with can an ARP's specific and original requirement of an ethical framework be said to be fulfilled.

Constructing decision-making structures

Concrete implementation of an ARP consists of two interconnected aspects: the decisional and the operational. The first is strategic in nature: How are decisions taken? In what form? Who takes them? When? The second is more tactical and relates to the implementation of activities.

We can thus consider the ARP set-up as divided into two: governance structures (decision-making mechanisms that bring together different types of stakeholders for different types of decisions) and operational set-ups (a set of experiments on a given theme, a series of workshops to address a question, a platform for producers and processors to improve the functioning of a sector, etc.). Each individual set-up may enjoy some degree of autonomy while still being linked to the others.

A given set-up consist of stakeholders who organize in a certain manner, agree on specific rules, and have access to resources which allow them to undertake activities in pursuit of specific goals that contribute to the proper functioning of the ARP. The set-up is the place where sites and times for stakeholder interactions are organized.

We know that interactions and the clash of different viewpoints, knowledge, and knowhow promote the emergence of innovations. The type of architecture and the mode of functioning of the set-ups put in place play a critical role in encouraging and stimulating these interactions.

A set-up's makeup depends very closely on the trajectories and strategies initially adopted for constructing the ARP project (see Chapter 6, "Enrolling stakeholders and the place of researchers" page 79 and Chapter 7, "Introducing action research rooted in partnership: the Unai project in Brazil," page 97). For example, two different strategies,

one initiated by researchers who are looking for partners for launching an ARP-based project, and another initiated by stakeholders who are willing to establish a dialog with researchers, will lead to the establishment of very different set-ups. Note that the cases of ARPs initiated by researchers are much greater in number that those by other stakeholder types. The latter often find it difficult to find researchers willing to enter into a partnership with them.

In some cases, ARP approaches adopt a "jump in and learn to swim" attitude conducive to creating adequate conditions for learning by the various partners (see Box 13, "Assistance to local communities and the land-use plan in Senegal," page 126). Other approaches, on the other hand, look on the initial training of partners as indispensable (see Chapter 14, "Training for action research in partnership: strategies, contents, and modalities," page 181). We can easily foresee that each of these strategies will lead to the creation of ad hoc mechanisms.

In addition, we often forget that set-ups are social constructs that are not created out of thin air. They rely on what already exists and are part of a history. This aspect must be remembered when designing and implementing them. We often tend to build a mechanism specifically for a project rather than examining what already exists and how it can be modified to arrive at the final, desired set-up.

Functioning as forums where different points of view are explained and contested, these set-ups can produce knowledge in their own right. But they can also be places where simmering conflicts may erupt and even lead to the expulsion of members.

Diversity of governance mechanisms

Because decision making concerns all stakeholders, constructing appropriate governance mechanisms assumes importance. The decision-making process needs to follow principles which institutions or individuals have agreed upon. There is no fixed template and each ARP is free to build governance mechanisms most suited to its stakeholders' objectives and the project's context.

Very often, these mechanisms take the form of formal committees or other types of bodies. Operational, decision-making, scientific, and arbitration committees are common examples. Each consists of a different group of members and takes decisions relating to its role (see Chapter 11, the Teria example, page 143). But the mechanisms can also

remain more informal so that there is greater chance of participation from amongst the stakeholders.

Just like other key ARP elements, the governance system too has to be based on rules agreed by all. Moreover, it has to be and remain an effective system and avoid falling into the trap of bureaucratic functioning. Such a governance system can only emerge gradually and collectively.

Some examples of governance mechanisms are presented below.

⏮ Steering committee

In most ARPs, the stakeholders set up steering committees. Traditionally, a steering committee consists of decision makers who can monitor a project's progress, steer it in the right direction if it strays, and act as an arbitration body. An ARP steering committee consists of representatives of project partners representing on-field stakeholders, researchers, and possibly even funding entities.

The steering committee ensures proper execution of the common work program, decides if modifications are necessary due to changing circumstances or contexts, submits accounts to the partners, validates the results, and mediates conflicts or disagreements. In doing so, it facilitates dialog between the partners and encourages learning and reflexivity.

⏮ Scientific committee

Some ARP projects also set up a scientific committee. Its role is to ensure a balance between scientific-knowledge production, resolution of problems, and learning. One of its main functions is to help researchers maintain the necessary detachment from their object of study (see Chapter 7, "Reflections on the degree and type of involvement") and to guarantee that the research is scientifically valid. This committee generally consists of recognized scientists in the main disciplines of the ARP project.

⏮ Local committees

It is often felt necessary to set up local structures for planning activities, implementing them, and evaluating results. Local structures are more in tune with local requirements, often very specific, and they facilitate planning of field work, or defining each participant's tasks, analyzing results, etc. Of course, their effectiveness is closely linked to the preparatory work done in setting them up, the ability of the

stakeholders to manage an interactive process, and the commitment each one makes to do his or her bit.

Even here there are no standard templates. Figure 5 shows a specific example provided by the project "Building innovative fish farming in partnership in Cameroon" (see Figure 5 and Table 1). Three types of governance bodies were established: a steering committee, a scientific committee, and local committees. In this case, the latter were common initiative groups: the "Intensive Fish Farming Group" of Fokoue and Penka Michel in Menoua (and Fishermen and Fish Farmers from Santchou (Pepisa). Table 1 shows the role and composition of each of these bodies.

An ARP's smooth running requires effective coordination between each governance body eventually put in place. This ensures that conclusions and recommendations of one are not contradicted by another ("More science," says the scientific committee, "More concrete actions," say the local committees) and that there are no overlap of skills or jurisdictions. The governance bodies have also to avoid falling into the bureaucratization trap; they have to consciously preserve the flexibility and real-time adaptability that any ARP approach requires.

‖▶ Monitoring and evaluation

Governance set-ups are the place where a reflexive process of monitoring and evaluation of the ARP project's functioning has to take place to ensure that the project's strategy remains on course. This process helps identify errors in the orientation of the project and to prescribe remedial action, if necessary.

This monitoring and evaluation process is covered in detail in part 4 as is the assessment of changes effected, of methods mobilized, and of activities undertaken. For the time being though, we will only emphasize the importance of encouraging a culture of self-evaluation by characterizing the ARP set-ups according to the following criteria:
– Their effectiveness, i.e., what are the final differences between the goals originally fixed and the results obtained, and how to explain the differences;
– Their efficiency, i.e., what are the results obtained with respect to the resources mobilized and what is the cost/benefit ratio;
– Their sustainability and their effects, i.e., can the process continue after the first ARP cycle? Have the changes had any significant effect?

The process of change is evaluated by the stakeholders themselves; they define the indicators to measure the results obtained. It would be incongruous to evaluate an ARP process only via external evaluation grids and criteria. This reflexive work on the indicators – qualitative or quantitative – is also a source of learning.
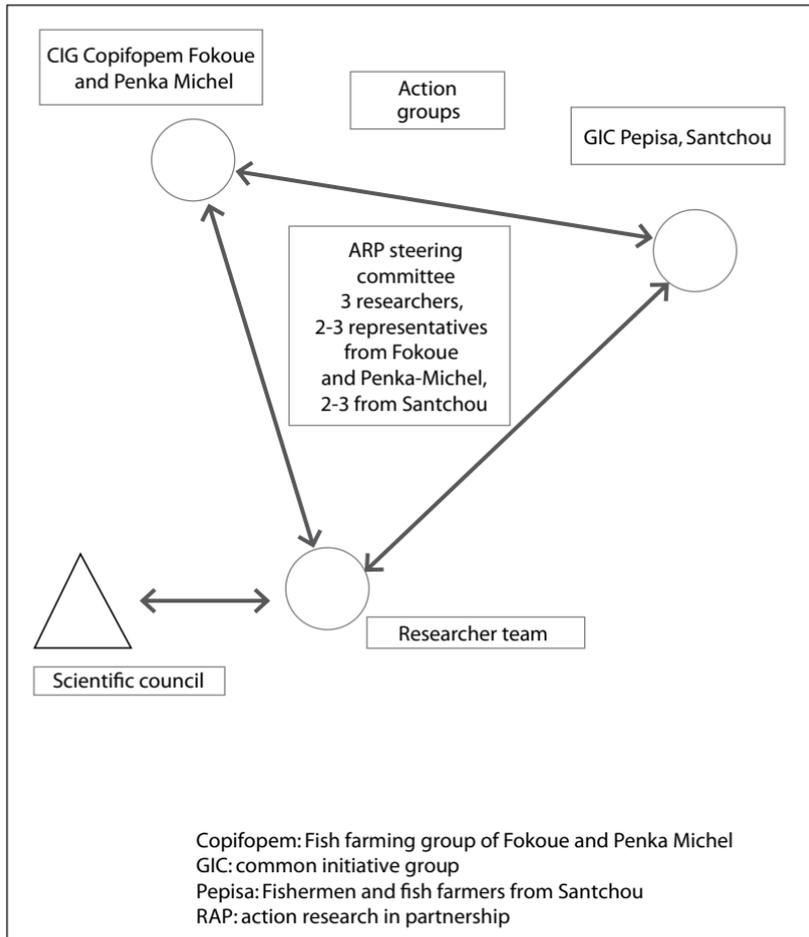

Figure 5. The governance mechanism of the project "Building innovative fish farming in partnership in Cameroon." Source: Dulcire et al., 2008

Table 1. Role and composition of the governance authorities of the project "Building innovative fish farming in partnership in Cameroon"

Body	Role	Composition
Steering committee	– Planning activities – Monitoring activities; reorientation, if necessary – Arbitration in case of conflicts – Funding negotiations	University of Dschang, Cirad, representatives of each of the two common initiative groups
Common initiative group	– Interfacing between scientists and farmers – Executive steering of activities at the village level – Monitoring the circulation of information	Representatives of fishermen and fish farmer groups, technicians
Scientific committee	– Monitoring the quality of scientific knowledge produced – Scoping of methods – If necessary, proposals for strategic reorientation	Cirad, Inra, Universities

Operating rules

Establishing governance mechanisms involves laying down operating rules. The aim of such rules is to facilitate the execution of the ARP project, without rigidifying it. Two types of rules are necessary: those that ensure the smooth functioning of the ARP and those that allow the set-up to evolve over time, for example, rules that define who can enter or exit an ARP or specify procedures for taking important decisions.

But rules have also to be accompanied by incentives for those who abide by them and penalties for those who choose not to: reprimands and moral pressure from the group, temporary or permanent expulsion from the ARP, or possible financial penalties. Whenever rules are formulated, realistic modalities of applying them should also be defined.

Clarifying rules and ensuring transparency in their formulation and application goes a long way in balancing asymmetric relationships that frequently exist between stakeholders. Therefore, different

interpretations of the same rule by different stakeholders should be avoided. Such an effort helps create the conditions for trust to grow and strengthens each participant's commitment to the project (see Chapter 7, "Context and issues," page 97).

Different examples of the construction of rules are presented below. Keep in mind that each ARP has to find its own way to build its own rules; there is no fixed rulebook that can be applied to every case.

▶ Work charter

Few projects start by drafting a work charter. The project "Varietal Innovation Platforms on Bananas and Plantain in West and Central Africa" (Innobap) did just that (see Box 11). Innobap is a regional network of exchange platforms for improved identification of farmer needs and the dissemination of new banana and plantain varieties in central and western Africa.

Box 11. An example of a work charter: the Innobap project
B. Lokossou, M. Lama, K. Tomekpe, C. Ngnigone, J. Lançon, H. Hocdé
Research teams working on banana in four French-speaking African countries came together to undertake a project called Innobap (Varietal Innovation Platforms on Bananas and Plantain in West and Central Africa). In a conventional research project, the kick-off workshop focuses, sometimes almost exclusively, on experimental protocols and mechanisms. However, in each of the four countries, the core project initiative takers, consisting of representatives of farmer organizations and one or two researchers, gave the workshop a totally different orientation by focusing on:
– Drawing up specifications for varietal evaluation;
– Formalizing the commitments of the various participants;
– Constituting a steering committee in charge of determining operating rules;
– Defining varietal experimentation set-ups (tests) either on-station or on-farm;
This set of four points, designated "platform," constitutes a formal mechanism of collaboration between users and researchers.
The draft of the charter was hammered out during the workshop based on these four points. At the end of the workshop, the charter was dated and signed by the members of the steering committee.

There is no doubt that launching a project by formalizing commitments is no mean task. And it cannot be automatically assumed that commitments made will eventually be honored.

Experience has shown that the time teams take to define their methods of work and the conditions of applying the charters they have adopted is time well spent. This becomes particularly clear when the project is confronted by typical difficulties – as all projects will be at some time or other – or when an unexpected constraint intervenes, such as a halt of external funding.

◗ Specifications

Since formal work charters and ethical frameworks still remain rarities in ARP projects, partners normally put down their commitments in diverse specifications documents. These specifications apply mainly to the functioning of operational mechanisms: conducting experiments, holding training sessions or structured exchange visits, setting up a supply chain, etc.

The Sorghum agro-biodiversity project in Mali and Burkina Faso which ran from 2002 to 2005 offers an example. Plant breeders, farmers, technicians, and farmer organizations decided to create new varieties of sorghum together. To specify who did what, they drafted the specifications document, shown in Figure 6.

More generally, these specifications become the central document in an ARP approach and the basis of dialog between partners. They help participants recognize and understand each other's expectations and trigger the construction of a joint project. As a participant of an ARP on the development of agriculture-livestock relationships in Burkina Faso commented, "It's a meaningful document; anyone can refer to it at any time. It's a moral contract drawn up with everyone's inputs; it was discussed at different levels, first within the executive office of the village coordination committee, then in the village itself with the person who had volunteered to conduct the test. Everyone got an opportunity to be heard." (Vall *et al*., 2007)

◗ Commitments and formalization

The concept of commitments is at the heart of ARP mechanisms. The formalization of these commitments promotes the stakeholders' potential for autonomy and builds their capacities to co-construct innovations and act like true partners. Formalization is much more than a mere advance, it can be considered a keystone of an ARP approach because it encourages the establishment of rules that manage relationships between members of a collective.

Participatory selection of sorghum
Specifications agreed upon by farmers, producer organizations, researchers, and technicians

Producer tasks	**Researchers tasks**	**Farmer organization/ sorghum field-advisor tasks**
Identification of an isolated plot	Definition and explanation of activities	Providing communication channels between producers and researchers
Setting up the experiment	Drawing up of protocols (experiments and evaluation)	Organizing planning and back-reporting workshops
Crop monitoring	Confirming the choice of the plot	Selecting producers
dentification of sterile male plants	Support and verification of the crop monitoring (visits + training)	Confirming the choice of the plot
Harvesting of sterile male plants	Training of producers and sorghum field- advisors in plant-population management	Participating in crop monitoring
Evaluation and sorting of sterile male plants	Coordinating the process of selecting fertile plants	Providing support for identification of sterile male plants
Selection of fertile plants for the development of varieties (pure lines)	Analysis of results and stockpiling of seed stock for the next generation	Organizing, facilitating and documenting the evaluation and classification of sterile male plants
		Facilitating the selection of fertile plants

Figure 6. The specifications document of the Sorghum agro-biodiversity project in Mali and Burkina Faso which ran from 2002 to 2005. Source: Vom Brocke *et al.*, 2008

What is meant by formalize in practical terms? What is a suitable level of codification or formalization? Depending on the context, and cultural and social environment, formalization can mean putting things down in writing. This is what institutions, researchers, and technicians expect and aim at. However, there are social groups, especially in rural societies in the South, where written documents have limited reach. Then written documents will limit us to the world of the technician and exclude the locals.

Therefore ARP practitioners have to closely verify what formalization means for each stakeholder, irrespective of his or her socio-professional category, and ensure that they do not confuse the letter

and the spirit. The key questions that the teams concerned will need to answer are:

– What specific commitments are we trying to formalize?

– What do we expect from formalization in terms of results, trust, and capacities to overcome difficulties?

– What consequences (foreseen and unforeseen) can they induce?

– When should formalization take place (at the start, during the project)?

– What form should it take (written document, verbal commitment before persons who are recognized locally for their moral authority, etc.)?

– How to make it public (formal ceremony, informal social occasion, website, etc.)?

Summary

The success of governance and operational mechanisms implemented as part of an ARP approach depends on the stakeholders' willingness and ability to breathe life into them and to make them integral parts of their partnership. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that it is not always easy to apply a set of principles, using what already exist as a basis, to build mechanismsthat take the context and the problems identified by the stakeholders into account. It is more an art than a science, and requires ingenuity and imagination on part of the stakeholders concerned.

Finally, it is clear that these mechanisms, their construction, their implementation, and the analysis of their performance provide learning opportunities for all ARP stakeholders. We will examine this idea in greater detail in Part 4.