

Plenty of scope for NGO-GO partnership



Recent donor interest in nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) could have negative effects by overstressing their capacities. John Farrington describes how the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is working with agriculturally-oriented NGOs in the South and exploring ways in which they can link up with governmental organisations (GOs).

John Farrington

Levels of donor interest in and funding for NGOs have increased dramatically: they now amount to over 15% of all net aid flows from North to South. Many North-based (or international) NGOs, in turn, finance local NGOs on a "core" programme or project basis. Often, NGOs also seek to support local membership groups such as small farmers' associations, though, of course, these may also have independent sources of funding through membership fees or levies on crop sales. There is a real danger that the "megabucks" syndrome will – through lack of understanding of the ethos, objectives and limitations of NGOs – have far more negative than positive effects. To those who have worked closely with NGOs, it is already clear, for instance, that the number and type of NGOs that can work

Cropping on contour strips with *Leucaena* and other species interspersed with annual and perennial crops. The South Mindanao Baptists Rural Life Centre is a NGO in the Philippines which has more than 15 years experience in designing technology and management practices for sloping agriculture lands (rainfed). Photo: John Farrington.

successfully with the rural poor is often constrained by the overall political climate. In many areas they are regarded as "politically suspect". Similarly, it is now often the shortage of individuals having sympathetic and skilled leadership qualities that is a more severe constraint on the successful expansion of NGOs than funds alone.

Documenting NGO achievements and needs

We need to understand more about NGOs if the potentially negative effects of this new interest in them are to be minimised. ODI is working with NGOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America with two main objectives.

The first is to invite NGOs to document the types of work they have been doing in agriculture (in its broad definition of crops, animals and trees, on- or off-farm). NGOs are widely seen by government organisations (GOs) as amateurish and transient. Only if we document how they have worked with farmers to identify new technologies and management practices – and place these in the

context of NGOs' philosophy, their contacts with the wider scientific community and the levels of training of their own staff – can we dispel some of these prejudices.

The results of this documentation confirm what has been suggested in earlier issues of the ILEIA Newsletter and elsewhere (e.g. Farrington & Martin 1988), namely that NGOs are good at identifying farmers' requirements and combining local knowledge with that from the wider scientific community in responding to these needs. However, many NGOs lack specific technical skills and facilities (such as technical equipment and libraries) which are expensive and so difficult to acquire.

International NGO networks and newsletters reduce this problem by providing ideas on management practices and technologies for NGOs to try out, but newsletters can rarely help where such ideas produce unexpected results. NGOs need to be able to draw upon local skills to meet these eventualities, and this is a good reason for establishing working relations with government research and extension services which might, incidentally, also have ideas worth trying out.

Forging closer links with GOs

The second objective of the ODI study is therefore also to look at the scope for closer two-way links between GOs and

NGOs. In some countries, government research and extension services are seeking to support NGOs by making technology available from research stations that NGOs may wish to try out. So far, very few GOs are willing to act on the "feedback" that NGOs can provide by, for instance, changing their own research priorities to make them more relevant to farmers' needs. Most of the 50 NGO case studies with which ODI is working show how NGOs and GOs have tried to work together, how far they have succeeded or failed, and why.

In a second stage, the study will bring together NGOs and GOs having "hands-on" experience of working together at a series of regional workshops in Africa, Asia and Latin America. These will aim to indicate to senior officials and representatives of funding agencies some "what-next" steps for closer NGO-GO working relations in each country.

Some preliminary findings from this work are the following:

NGOs are on the frontier

The NGOs studied are highly diverse, varying in size, objectives, modes of operation and levels of skill, but most of them were found to be operating in the more difficult agricultural areas or with marginalised groups where government research and extension services tend to be weak.

For example, in Bangladesh government agricultural research – almost by definition – ignores the 50% of the working population that has inadequate access to land. NGOs have been innovative in working on backyard activities that require little land, e.g. work by Proshika and BRAC on poultry and sericulture; work by Friends in Village Development on ducks; work by several NGOs in providing small groups of landless labourers with the credit and skills to operate mobile pumps and so sell water to farmers. In several cases, these NGOs are seeking to (or have already) supplement their skills with those available from GOs. Some of these programmes initiated by NGOs are now being replicated by government.

NGOs promote group action

Empowerment and group formation are important NGO objectives. They work on agriculture within the context both of these objectives, and of their wider activities in health, nutrition, education etc. They can therefore screen out as inappropriate those agricultural technologies and management practices that are inconsistent with these wider contexts.

For example, a consortium of local NGOs in Andhra Pradesh, India, has

worked with an international NGO (Action for World Solidarity) and with national and international research services in devising and implementing farmers' integrated management of a major pest of castor. The method involved use of light traps to determine peak moth emergence followed by synchronised lighting of bonfires over a wide area into which the moths were attracted. This group action subsequently fed into village-based initiatives for castor seed production.

One of the other most innovative efforts in seed production is in The Gambia, where NGOs have helped to test varieties and multiply seed at village level, certification services being provided by a specialist GO. However, this work is threatened by the limited range of genetic material coming out of government research, and by some confusion over roles and responsibilities.

NGOs have their own agenda

It was found that the NGOs are wary of any GO moves that might restrict their agenda. In particular, most NGOs are unhappy with the idea of, e.g., simply forming part of the government extension service in one district or other. However, they have responded well to invitations to work together on an equal-partner basis.

For example, World Bank-funded efforts in Bolivia to "involve" NGOs in tightly defined dissemination roles are running into trouble partly because they do not allow NGOs a voice in re-

Some NGO also works on sustainable use of forest products – planting rattan (the horny bush) as part of a mixed tree species plot. Photo: John Farrington.



source allocation decisions. In a separate initiative, a new Bolivian NGO (PROCADE), formed to service several smaller NGOs, responded well to GO invitations to "search" its shelves for technologies that might be useful to its partners.

NGOs integrate research and development

The NGOs are free of the institutional barriers between research, dissemination and implementation that often characterise GOs.

For example, Bharatiya Agro-Industries Foundation (BAIF) in India pioneered research into frozen semen technology for artificial insemination in a crossbred dairy cattle programme. This was implemented by its own field-staff serving 1.5 million farmers in 6 districts, who provided feedback on progeny testing and on health and nutrition which stimulated further research and development in these subjects. GOs could learn much from this integration of functions.

NGOs develop appropriate methodology

In some contexts, NGOs have provided a lead to GOs in participatory and rapid methodology for diagnosis of research needs and for the monitoring and evaluation of the technologies introduced.

For example, CARE and Mazingira in Kenya worked with farmers to understand their criteria for selecting tree species and monitoring their performance. These techniques have begun to replace some of the long-term species trials undertaken by the Kenya Forestry Research Institute, thus saving on scarce research resources, and led to the development of ICRAF's Diagnosis and Design methodology, which it now widely used.

NGOs can have "pull"

Overall, there is plenty of scope for NGOs to "pull" government research and extension programmes round to small farmers' requirements. The pressing need is for sensitive approaches by GOs to work with NGOs in redesigning these programmes, and research is in progress to identify the respective merits of a range of different approaches. ■

Reference

Farrington, J. & Martin, A. 1988. *Farmer participation in agricultural research: a review of concepts and practices*. Occasional Paper 9.

John Farrington, ODI
Regent's College
Regent's Park
London NW1 4NS, UK