

Change through shared learning

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In 2000, the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) began experimenting with new ways of linking research and development. This came out of a deep frustration with traditional training courses and research activities, where knowledge is normally transferred in one direction. Participants in training courses often adapt, change and improve what they learn as they make use of it in their day-to-day work, but this richness and creativity is rarely documented or understood. In a similar way, much research has been carried out in a way which extracts knowledge from local communities and provides little in the way of useful feedback. Through discussions with several NGO partners in Central America, we reached a conclusion that there had to be better ways to link research and development processes, and so embarked on the journey described here. Since that time, this approach has spread widely under the name of “Learning Alliances” and is currently in use with multiple partners in more than 30 countries.

What is a Learning Alliance?

We currently understand a Learning Alliance to be a process undertaken jointly by research organisations, donor and development agencies, policymakers and private businesses. It involves identifying, sharing and adapting good practices in research and development in specific contexts and on specific topics. We are not looking for one right answer, but rather for the combination and recombination of knowledge from many different actors as we work together to solve key problems. Results can then be used to strengthen capacities for development practice, generate and document development outcomes, identify future research needs and areas for collaboration, and inform public and private sector policy decisions. This approach constitutes a qualitatively different way for research and development actors to work together.

To date, a range of farmer organisations are participating in diverse Learning Alliances, but usually with the support of others –for example international NGOs– with whom they are collaborating. It is important to note that, over the last six years, the range of actors who participate in a Learning Alliance has grown substantially. A Learning Alliance seeks to identify leverage points through which system change can be achieved. This leads us to combine different types of participants in common learning processes to find innovative ways of promoting rural development. For example, the inclusion of policymakers from funding agencies or the private sector permits a wider perspective on processes of rural development. This wider dialogue, in turn, facilitates greater collective understanding and, potentially, change to make all of our work more effective. Under this approach no one group receives preferential treatment as all are perceived as valid participants in existing innovation systems.

What does a Learning Alliance seek to do?

The main objective is to facilitate the identification, adaptation and, finally, adoption of approaches, methods and tools that will improve the effectiveness of rural development processes. Diverse partners will require, and provide, different information and knowledge. For example, development agencies can provide concrete experiences where approaches or methods have or have not worked and explain the reasons to others. Research agencies, in turn, can help understand why certain approaches are effective in some communities and not in others. The

combination of development experiences and research tools is a good starting point for establishing discussions with policymakers about what approaches are most effective to facilitate rural development processes that are both inclusive and effective in terms of poverty reduction. Finally, the lessons learned through common processes help to facilitate informed dialogue with larger scale private and public actors.

How do Learning Alliances work?

The establishment of a Learning Alliance begins with the identification of a general theme. In this case, the theme is rural enterprise development. The second step is to identify and convene organisations interested in learning about this topic. These organisations may be limited to a specific geographic area, or based on contacts and networks that already exist. At this stage it is important to select partners who have both the interest and capacity to participate in the entire process. A diversity of skills and experiences is an asset for this kind of learning process, as is the inclusion of “non-traditional” partners such as private-sector firms, government agencies and donors.

Once the initial group of organisations is identified, a workshop is held to identify specific learning questions or topics on which the learning process will focus. Under the topic of rural enterprise development, for example, Learning Alliances have looked at issues including identification of market opportunities, rural knowledge management, supply chain upgrading and governance and the effects of rural enterprise development on natural resource management. At this point, the most important thing is to identify topics around which sufficient interest and energy exists to move things forward. Another key issue is the definition of roles and responsibilities of the participating organisations. To assist in this, each topic is organised as a learning cycle.

In our experience, there are different levels of participation in each of the steps in the cycle. As a result, it is helpful to allow the participating organisations to define whether they wish to play a leading role, participate actively or have access to the results at each step. Another benefit of organising in this fashion is that organisations can use their strengths, i.e. they are not forced to participate in aspects of the learning cycle where they have little expertise, but remain active members in the overall process.

Once the roles and responsibilities have been identified, a simple work plan can be developed. The timeframe for implementing a learning cycle varies depending on the complexity of the specific topic and the time and resources needed to effectively test the prototype methods, tools and/or approaches in diverse contexts. In our experience, cycles can range anywhere from two to three months to up to one year.

At the conclusion of a learning cycle, several intermediate and final products are available to share with others. These include a document reviewing existing good practices; initial prototypes of methods, tools and approaches based on existing good practices; and improved or adapted versions of those prototypes tested in distinct contexts. Documented results achieved through the use of the prototypes in diverse contexts are also available, as are answers or at least as advances on the initial questions posed by the learning cycle. In addition to these products, the learning cycle also contributes to increased knowledge and skills among those participating.

Table 1. Types of learning documented in the Central America Learning Alliance

Type of learning	Description
Organisational learning practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved internal information flows between partner offices in Central America, mostly through informal channels Processes of shared organisational learning among partner agencies lead to increased cooperation among them Contribution to institutionalising organisational learning initiatives beyond the theme of rural enterprise development
Development interventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased focus on marketing and supply chains, not just on-farm agricultural production More ordered development processes that incorporate elements of enterprise development Focused complementary research provides new insights on rural enterprise development processes
Specific knowledge and capacity development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use and adaptation of a wide range of enterprise development tools in four countries by 19 partner agencies working with a total of 57 local organisations

What have we learned?

Our experience in using this approach in Latin America, Africa and Asia has shown that there are several general issues that are common across nearly all of the Learning Alliances in which CIAT is participating. These include:

- *Partner and participant selection.* The selection of partner agencies and appropriate individuals is critical to success. Both agencies and individual staff should be open to critical reflection and learning about their own practice. In addition, partner and participant turnover has significant negative impacts on the learning process and should be avoided if possible.
- *Process facilitation and coordination.* To stay vibrant, a Learning Alliance must adapt and change as learning occurs and new questions arise. CIAT recommends assigning staff to this area to ensure that goals are met and partners do not lose interest in the process. Contrary to development projects, where the biggest share of the budget is allocated to operations; Learning Alliances need to allocate a higher share of their budget to personnel.
- *Funding.* Finding a donor agency interested in funding an open-ended learning process is the exception rather than the rule. It may be easier to get funding for specific research and development projects that use a Learning Alliance as an implementation mechanism. Funding can also be found by linking to large development initiatives, replacing dissemination and training budgets with Learning Alliance activities. This issue should be discussed early during project design and often in the process to guarantee some sustainability.
- *Linking learning.* Documenting, analysing and sharing a wide range of learning from diverse partner agencies at all levels is demanding. The selection of a few key research questions that link partner agencies is one way of managing this, as are the creative application of diverse tools and methods to promote processes of reflection and learning (see, for example, *LEISA Magazine* Vol 22.1).

Results from the Central America Learning Alliance

What kind of learning is actually occurring within the alliances? Initial results in Central America highlight changes in organisational learning practices and development interventions as well as the acquisition or improvement of specific knowledge and capabilities. Table 1 presents a brief description of the kinds of learning encountered in Central America.

For participating partner agencies and their staff, the kind of learning occurring in the Central American Learning Alliance has several implications. First, participating staff are recognised

within their organisations and by others as resource people for processes of enterprise development. Participants access knowledge and improve specific skills that improve their capacity to lead market-oriented processes of rural development. Secondly, participating organisations are able to generate innovative interventions based on increased staff capacity and knowledge as well as improved internal knowledge management and thus differentiate themselves in the development marketplace and compete more effectively for scarce resources.

Discussion and conclusions

One of the main reasons for initiating the work on Learning Alliances was a realisation that a research centre can only play a small role in improving processes of rural development. By linking with other like-minded organisations in a meaningful fashion, the potential contribution of research to a larger innovation system can be important. As this work has advanced, we have identified some critical points through which effective change can be achieved. Often, these critical points involve working with “non-traditional” partners, such as large-scale private processors, national and international retail chains and governments at different levels. While partnerships of this nature are seldom easy to establish and maintain, we feel that they provide an important leverage point to improving the lives of smallholder producers in many parts of the developing world. Learning Alliances can provide a shared space in which to develop and nurture these initiatives while participating organisations adapt to these new partnerships.

The basic premises behind Learning Alliances are not entirely new, nor are the approaches used in terms of learning cycles novel. What makes the Learning Alliance approach different and useful is the fact that it brings together a diverse range of actors who, traditionally, have not worked together to solve problems. While this framework does not mean that all the difficult questions and issues related to relative power, decision-making and social equity can easily be resolved, it does provide a forum for these discussions. In addition, the development of shared knowledge relevant to all actors involved is an important step towards building a common understanding of what can and needs to be done to support the development of rural communities across the globe. We believe that the combination of personal and organisational change will lead to more effective processes for rural development by partner agencies. This point is currently being evaluated in Central America, with results expected by the end of 2006.

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