



# A platform developing sustainable agriculture

**W**hen ILEIA chose northern Ghana as a site for research for LEISA, it was not only because it fulfilled the agroecological criteria of being a dry land ecosystem. It was also because it was the home of a network, the Association of Church Development Projects, which was collaborating with

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local research and training institutions in a participatory approach to developing LEISA. The ILEIA research project was to be based on the concerted action of stakeholders in agricultural development: governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in research, extension and teaching, and men and women farmers. In northern Ghana, the foundations for Stakeholder Concerted Action had already been laid.

ACDEP worked with governmental institutions in field-level planning of agricultural research and development, trained extension staff and ran joint workshops, and hosted university students doing field assignments. It had created a coordinating unit, the Agricultural Information Service, to facilitate this

collaboration. In 1995, the ILEIA research gave ACDEP the impulse and opportunity to strengthen existing linkages and bring the various institutions together to form the Northern Ghana LEISA Working Group as a platform for sustainable agriculture. This article describes the experiences of this platform in its research and development activities, and as an advocate of LEISA in the policy sphere.

## The NGLWG platform

The stakeholders that came together in 1995 to form the NGLWG came from development, research, and teaching. In the beginning, farmers were involved primarily as partners and beneficiaries in the experimentation and evaluation in the field rather than at the institutional level in project management and advocacy. Only gradually did the farmers from the pilot sites become more involved in the latter as they gained confidence in their abilities and influence.

The NGLWG wanted to collaborate with ILEIA in the research on LEISA in order to:

- feed into the on-going experimentation by farmers in their efforts to sustain production,
- collect field data to convince policy-makers about the potential of LEISA as

an effective strategy for agricultural development, and

- encourage farmers to experiment and improve their skills in experimentation.

All the parties involved had witnessed the failure of past attempts to 'modernise' agriculture. The removal of government subsidies on 'modern' inputs had made them too costly for smallholders. In the meantime, the traditional farming systems based on local resources, including indigenous knowledge, had endured, albeit with diminishing yields. The vast majority of farmers continued to derive their livelihood from low-external-input agriculture.

## Organising ourselves for joint action

The NGLWG organised a workshop to review the results of the initial field exercises designed to document socioeconomic conditions and local experiences with LEISA. Further training workshops in Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), PTD and Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems (RAAKS) gave people from the stakeholder institutions a chance to gain a better understanding not only of the existing situation but also of each other's roles, and to agree on joint action. We worked out our own management structure to ensure transparency, effec-



All stakeholders meet during the ILEIA-Northern Ghana LEISA Working Group workshop.

Photo: Bert Lot

tiveness and participatory decision-making while implementing the collaborative research.

### Three main activities in SCA

**Participatory research.** The PTD process (Millar p 43) harnessed the different strengths and expertise of the partners:

- indigenous knowledge and other resources of farmers, male and female, old and young;
- experience in participatory approaches of the NGOs and their rapport with farm communities;
- scientific knowledge and research experience of the research institutes and the university;
- the administrative support of MOFA at district level.

The farmers' knowledge of local conditions and practices and their experience in informal experimentation was combined with the scientists' knowledge in order to design experiments that the farmers could carry out themselves with their own resources. The experiments were jointly monitored and assessed by farmers, NGO staff and scientists, using agreed indicators. Farmers made their own changes in subsequent experiments on the basis of their new experiences. SARI did the soil and yield analyses, and fed the results back to the farmers.

**Studies.** Field studies were made by scientists as part of the PTD process of seeking options to test, and in order to understand the context, extent, causes and effects of the key problem identified by farmers: low

soil fertility. The studies were better integrated into the PTD process after the NGLWG rather than ILEIA took over the tasks of identifying the studies to be implemented, commissioning them and discussing the results.

**Advocacy workshops.** The NGLWG organised research workshops that were attended by policy-makers from research, MOFA, the university and the NGOs involved in the collaboration, as well as by some regional and national politicians. At three such meetings held between 1997 and 1999, results and experiences from the field were presented. The experimenting farmers were the main resource persons. The workshops served to advocate the role of PTD and LEISA in sustainable development.

### Experiences and learning points

**Coming to terms with ILEIA.** The research collaboration followed a rocky path to begin with. This was due to a lack of clarity in ILEIA and NGLWG about the project goal and strategies, the differing expectations of the collaboration, and conflicting views about roles. This problem was compounded by time pressure to complete the project and the expectations of those funding ILEIA and ACDEP activities.

ILEIA and ACDEP had worked together previously in information exchange. ACDEP saw the research project as an opportunity for more concrete collaboration on LEISA and PTD. The NGLWG developed a programme in this direction at its initial planning workshop before any personal contact with the newly recruited ILEIA research team was established.

That team saw things differently: it sought to understand the conditions and potentials for LEISA within the broad framework of natural resource management, supported by contextual and policy studies. It saw the NGLWG as an organisational structure that would help ILEIA reach the project targets. NGLWG, however, saw itself as a potential platform for advancing LEISA at farmer and policy level. It expected that, by the end of the project, the group's capacity and skills to continue this function would be strengthened. As part of the capacity-building process, it expected a guided devolution of project implementation from ILEIA to the group.

The ILEIA research team did not appear comfortable with this role for the group, possibly because, being new to ILEIA, the team had no previous contact with ACDEP. It saw only the specific outputs that had to be produced by the end of four years. For the NGLWG, any collaboration with external agencies had to benefit farmers directly, and it was not clear how the farmers would benefit from the approach proposed by the ILEIA research team.

The conflict eventually led to a call for an external review of the project. This review led to a new strategy that incorporated the expectations of the NGLWG. It was only then - almost two years after the official start of the project - that agreement could be reached between ILEIA and the NGLWG on programme, outputs, budget and implementation, and PTD work could begin in the field.

From 1997 onwards, ILEIA shared all project documents with the NGLWG and devolved all issues related to project implementation to it. This transparency and trust challenged the group to prove itself. The managers of the institutions involved gave their moral support to NGLWG by visiting the participating farmers and by taking part in the research workshops. ACDEP provided office space and secretarial service (partly financed by the project) as well as senior staff, with many years' experience in project management, to support the group. This played an important role in building the platform.

### Reconciling internal differences.

Despite the fact that the NGLWG was built on an existing foundation for collaboration, it was - in many respects - a new network. It had to go through a process of negotiating individual, institutional and group interests, building a collective vision, gaining the commitment of all members, and developing its own dynamics, norms, working principles and procedures.

One issue was the status of the group. Was it to be an independent network, or a working group under ACDEP? When the project started officially, the members accepted the lead role of ACDEP and the location of the network within the ACDEP secretariat. They saw the research project as a collaboration between ILEIA and ACDEP, which they were invited to join as resource institutions. However, in the course of project implementation, the group gradually recognised its potential as an institution in its own right and one that could support the fieldwork of NGOs and MOFA and influence policy on a more permanent basis.

Another issue was whether the group was based on individual or institutional membership. ILEIA and ACDEP had invited the institutions that were the most important actors in agricultural development in northern Ghana to form the NGLWG. The institutions were motivated to participate, partly because of government policy favouring closer interaction between government institutions and NGOs and partly because of the benefits they had come to recognise during their previous collaboration with ACDEP. The task at hand and the geographical area being covered fell within their mandate. To form the group, ACDEP deliberately

contacted key allies within these institutions with relevant experience and interests. There was no formal institutional membership. Participation in the group was based on individual and institutional interest. This combination allowed the group to operate as an 'officially' recognised informal platform that functioned on a collegial basis. This accounted for the commitment of group members and the success of the group's activities.

Towards the end of the research project, all members of the NGLWG convened specifically to discuss these issues. We agreed that the future of the group would be best secured under a NGO, and decided to seek this under the legal framework of ACDEP. Furthermore, we sought to interest an increasing number of individuals from our respective institutions to join the platform as a strategy for institutionalising LEISA and PTD within the key agencies for research and development in northern Ghana.

All members of the group and some policy-makers expressed the need to concretise and expand the experiences and benefits of PTD with farmers. The NGLWG appears to be the most suitable platform for facilitating this scaling-up process and for generating information to support policy change at district and national level. The group has therefore drawn up a long-term programme to continue promoting PTD and LEISA in the field and in policy-making.

### Achievements of the SCA

**Gaining mutual respect.** SCA provided an opportunity for experiential learning and appreciation of the knowledge not only of the farmers, who have been the prime teachers in the process, but also of the other professionals. The scientists

began to respect the experience of the NGOs who, in turn, began to see that scientists and university teachers can bring useful insights to support farmer-led research. Each profession contributed to the process from a different perspective, thus generating a feeling of collective responsibility and enriching the process and outputs.

**Internalising the approach.** After only two years of collaboration, the Faculty of Agriculture of UDS became sufficiently interested in LEISA and PTD to include these subjects in its curriculum (see p 52) and a workshop on LEISA and PTD was organised for all lecturers. Several District Directors of Agriculture in MOFA requested a training programme for their staff, and the first such training has already taken place in Builsa District.

**Building confidence.** Concerted action is bridging the gap between farmers and scientists. The participating farmers realised that scientists use at least some of the same criteria as they do in evaluating technologies. The instruments for measurement may differ, but are mutually reinforcing. PRA methods showed that ranking and scoring with pebbles and discussing the meanings of these scores can bring out important aspects of a technology that go beyond measuring kilograms per hectare. During the discussions, scientists found that farmers could understand and expand on scientific interpretations of the results. This experience increased both the scientists' and the farmers' confidence in farmer-led research.

**Training in action.** Concerted action was an immersion course for the NGO staff in PTD. As the staff had received

some training in PTD and had already tried to apply the approach before the research project began, they had a head start over government extensionists. However, during the fieldwork for the project, they realised that they still had a lot to learn about PTD. After two years of supporting farmer-led research, they were unanimous about the great learning effect of the experience.

**Influencing policy.** The NGLWG is best known to farmers for its collaboration in experimenting with LEISA technologies, but is best known to policy-makers for its advocacy work. The research workshops involving all stakeholders, including farmers, were vehicles for promoting LEISA as a more sustainable land-use system for northern Ghana than high-external-input agriculture. In their concerted action, the stakeholders have been showing how LEISA can be achieved.

### Facilitating factors

While a structure for SCA may present a suitable framework for action research at farm level, it will become more than just a 'sum of numbers' only if the members can agree on a collective vision and can recognise that, by combining forces, they are more likely to achieve their individual goals. They must learn to respect the expertise of the different professions involved and the value that each brings into the concerted action. The training in PRA, PTD and RAAKS and the collaboration in field studies of LEISA and in supporting farmer-led experimentation helped the members of the NGLWG to achieve this.

The prior experience of collaboration between the individuals and institutions that joined the platform was doubtless a factor that favoured its development. The working relationship of mutual trust that had already been established between farmers and the NGOs greatly facilitated community entry and collaboration with farmers as equal partners in the research project. The government's encouragement of its institutions to seek closer links with NGOs also played a facilitating role.

The move that ILEIA, as external agency, eventually made towards transparency and devolution of management responsibilities was a key factor in forming the platform. Internally, the efforts of the NGLWG to carry all members along through open information flow and participatory decision-making procedures contributed to lively and sometimes heated discussions that forged our collaboration and resolve to continue.



*Women farmer explaining PTD results from their village to the Minister for the Northern region.*

photo Bert Lot

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