

Promotion of Regional and International Alliances and spill-ins from a Country Perspective: Overview of Issues

Dr. Olanrewaju B. Smith
GFAR Executive Secretary
FAO, Rome

Partnerships and alliances are defined in several ways but the one adapted from Ozgediz and Nambi¹ by Michelsen² serves our purpose best. The latter defined partnerships as inter-institutional relationships that involve long term and purposeful relations between a national institution and those of other countries or international entities that are designed to focus on a common and mutually agreed upon agenda. This definition suggests that partnerships and alliances necessarily have to be between institutions. Indeed long lasting, effective and efficient partnerships can only be formed between institutions given their requirements for human, financial and physical resources as well as policy and political support.

There has been, over the last several years, a huge increase in regional and international research partnerships and alliances. Many competitive funding schemes insist on such transnational partnerships. For example a call for proposal from the CORAF for a competitive grant exercise indicated that “partner establishments in the consortium must be from at least three countries in the sub-region. IARCs and ARIs researchers may also be part of the consortium if deemed necessary” Moreover, many regional and sub-regional organizations are setting up centres of excellence in member countries, and these centres of excellence effectively address their mandate, only if other member countries contribute and participate and give their full support to this centre of excellence concept.

Some of the factors responsible for this upsurge in regional and international research alliances and partnerships are:

- A complex and changing agenda for agriculture and agricultural research. The sector can no longer only focus on contributing to food security and feeding an increasing global population, but must also contribute to alleviating poverty through income generation and improved livelihood systems, respond more and more to human health concerns in terms of food safety and quality, all of these without neglecting environmental stewardship and responsibility.
- A reorganization of the global agricultural research systems including the emergence of NARS inclusive of relevant stakeholders, the development regional and sub-regional agricultural research fora and the emergence of such new actors as farmers organizations, NGOs, and private sector.

¹ Ozgediz, S and A. Nambi 1999. Partnerships and networks: definitions, forms, critical success factors. Washington, DC. CGIAR Secretariat

² Michelsen., H. 2003. Improving benefits from transnational partnerships. In: Linking research and rural innovation to sustainable development. Proceedings GFAR 2003 conference, Dakar Senegal

- An increasing demand from donors for such alliances.
- The information communication technology revolution that has made the exchange of information across boundaries easier, and
- The increasing prominence of biotechnologies which call for new competences not always available in one institution.

Partnerships and alliances come in different forms and shapes and work in a variety of ways. They could be multi-institutional involving only research institutions or inclusive of other stakeholders in the form of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Partnerships could be along the south-south axis or south-north with collaboration between southern and northern groups and institutions. Increasingly we are witnessing public-private partnerships, although we do not yet see many of these in developing countries as they are perhaps the more difficult ones to get going, giving the sometimes differing goals of the two sectors.

The modus operandi of this various types of partnerships may differ and although other case studies will be presented during the session, it might be worthwhile to briefly describe two partnerships programmes to illustrate the point and help us in drawing some lessons learned for forging successful partnerships. The two case studies that will be presented are:

i) The Programme Concerté de recherche - développement sur l'élevage en Afrique de l'Ouest (PROCORDEL), a 4 year partnership programme that involves 13 institutions from 13 West African countries and coordinated by two sub-regional organizations, the International Trypanotolerant Centre, and the Centre international de recherche-développement sur l'élevage en zone sub-humide (CIRDES).

ii) The LABEX initiative on organizational partnership. A south-north partnership programme between about 40 Brazilian research centres and some 100 centres of the Agricultural Research Services (ARS) of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), on the one hand, and the same Brazilian institutions and with AGROPOLIS, a consortium of French research institutions.

Some of the lessons learned from these and other initiatives in forging successful partnerships include: a long-term commitment of the potential partners, a common and shared vision of the problems to be tackled, and the approaches to be utilized, a mutual respect for the complementary skills and expertise of partners on which partnerships should be built, adequate resources for effective coordination and the implementation of concrete mutually agreed upon activities, transparent and equitable sharing of resources and benefits, effective and open communication in order to share relevant information, flexibility to allow for changes and necessary modifications of activities, important decisions concerning strategies, approaches and implementation of activities taken with

full consultation and some level of consensus, implementation of activities at the most appropriate level – local, regional or global, early and sustained contacts at appropriate decision and policy making levels in order to establish and agree on policy related issues such as publications, benefits and resource sharing, intellectual property rights, etc.

In terms of the way forward, international partnerships and alliances appear set to continue to increase in number and complexity, and although there is an increasing body of recommendations on how make such partnerships work, there are still a long way from understanding how to successfully manage such complex arrangements. The skills required are different from project management skills and hence the need to develop new management skills through capacity building efforts. Perhaps we need more systematic analyses along the lines suggested by Michielsen² during the GFAR 2003 meeting to answer some important questions such as type of capacity building and skills required to better manage international alliances, and to provide practical advice for managers and researchers in order to avoid the pitfalls as high transaction costs, unequal distribution of benefits, and IP issues.