

Towards the institutionalisation of participatory approaches: the role of partnerships

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From delivering innovations to promoting innovation

In the past, mainstream rural development efforts were focused on technical interventions aimed mainly at controlling or manipulating nature through the use of external inputs. In the South, these efforts generally failed to give poor families more secure access to food and to improve their livelihoods. Most of the introduced technologies were inappropriate for poor farmers² in marginal, rainfed areas such as the drylands and mountains.

In such marginal settings, the key ingredients for sustainable resource management are not external inputs but rather labour, knowledge and local management capacities that enable people to manipulate skilfully the local resources. Most rural development efforts have failed to mobilise and enhance these “internal inputs”. The dominant approach to research and extension for rural development still follows the pattern of “transfer-of-technology”. This is based on the assumption that knowledge is created by scientists, to be packaged and spread by extension services and to be adopted by local people. In this model, extensionists’ role is defined as “delivery of innovation”, in a top-down, linear model of institutional support (Hamilton, 1998).

Over the last two decades, however, some examples of effective alternative approaches to research and development (R&D) for sustainable agriculture and natural resource management (NRM) in marginal areas have emerged. These approaches try to capitalise on the knowledge, creativity and management capacities of local people and to combine indigenous/ local and external knowledge in joint exploration and experimentation. Some examples are the Campesino-a-Campesino movement in Central America and the Indigenous Soil and Water Conservation (ISWC) and Promoting Farmer Innovation (PFI) projects in several countries in Africa. These approaches involve discovering and recognising what local resource users are trying to do in their own development and experimentation efforts, and building on these initiatives. They promote participatory action learning by resource users and supporting agencies in order to develop the local innovations and complementary techniques further. The impact of a local-innovation approach to R&D in improving the livelihoods of rural people and strengthening their organisational and self-help capacities has been documented, for example, in *Farmer Innovation in Africa*, a joint publication of the ISWC and PFI projects (Reij and Waters-Bayer, 2001).

Despite the commendable achievements of these and similar initiatives, they remain “islands of success”. The challenge is to scale up the processes that underlie these initiatives. This requires changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the major actors in agricultural R&D. Change in individuals is a first and necessary step towards change in the institutions in which they work (Lizares-Bodegon *et al.*, 2002). If scientists, development agents and other actors involved in agricultural R&D learn to recognise the local innovations that farmers develop on their own initiative, they begin to see farmers from a different perspective than in conventional approaches of delivering innovations to farmers. They are stimulated to reflect on the roles of

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different actors in the rural innovation system. It is upon this hypothesis that the initiative known as PROLINNOVA (Promoting Local Innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and natural resource management) was built.

The overall objective of PROLINNOVA is to develop and institutionalise partnerships and methodologies that promote processes of local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and NRM. The ultimate aim is that the approach of building on and enhancing local innovation processes through participatory action learning becomes understood, accepted and integrated into the regular work of research, extension and education institutions.

The programme is based on the conviction that “sustainable development requires a process of dialogue and ultimately consensus-building of all stakeholders as partners who together define the problems, design possible solutions, collaborate to implement them, and monitor and evaluate the outcome. Through such activities, stakeholders can build relationships and knowledge which will enable them to develop sustainable solutions to new challenges” (Hemmati, 2002).

The stakeholders in R&D for agriculture and NRM are highly diverse, including small participation-oriented or even politically activist NGOs and large, conservative government agencies. These actors have quite different perspectives, cultures and ways of working and interacting with others. How can partnerships among these diverse stakeholders be forged in order to scale up the process of change from delivering innovations to farmers towards developing innovations together with farmers? What are the basic principles that need to be followed? What strategies of building multi-stakeholder partnership are most effective? The experiences of the PROLINNOVA Country Programmes in building platforms in which various stakeholder groups negotiate, plan and implement joint action to promote a farmer-innovation approach to agricultural R&D can shed some light on these issues.

Local innovation as entry point to participatory research and development

Local innovation in agriculture and NRM is the process through which individuals or groups discover or develop new and better ways of managing resources, building on and expanding the boundaries of their existing knowledge. The innovations – i.e. the results of this process – may be not only of a technical but also of a socio-institutional nature. Especially in drier areas where livelihood systems are highly vulnerable to climatic risks, successful local innovations often involve new ways of gaining access to or regulating use of the natural resources, new ways of community organisation, or new ways of stakeholder interaction.

Identifying local innovations undertaken on farmers’ own initiative is a first step towards changing the way formal researchers and development workers regard farmers and interact with them. The purpose is not primarily to be able to disseminate the local innovations in a transfer-of-technology mode of extension - picking out what scientists consider to be the "best" solutions that are most widely applicable. This type of approach is not suited for the highly diverse environments in which most small-scale farmers live. Local innovations are locally developed to fit a particular biophysical and socio-economic setting and usually cannot be transferred in exactly the same form to other settings. However, the documentation and wider sharing of local innovations can provide ideas and inspiration for others to do their own experimentation and to adapt new ideas to other settings.

Local innovations offer entry points for linking local knowledge and formal scientific knowledge in community-led participatory R&D. For development agents and scientists,

learning to recognise and value local innovation and informal experimentation by farmers is an important step towards engaging in what is now being called Participatory Innovation Development (PID).

This is a more comprehensive term than Participatory Technology Development (PTD), an approach that has been promoted for many years by NGOs and has become increasingly widespread. Basically, the activities involved in PTD are:

- Getting started (getting to know each other)
- Joint analysis of the situation – the problems and opportunities
- Looking for things to try to improve the local situation
- Trying them out in community-led participatory experimentation
- Jointly analysing and sharing the results
- Strengthening the process, often through improving local organisation and linkages with other actors in R&D, so that the PTD process will continue.

As innovation in agriculture and NRM goes far beyond “hard” technologies to “soft” innovations such as in marketing, farmer organisation and co-management mechanisms, the term Participatory Innovation Development (PID) is increasingly being used instead of PTD to embrace this broader understanding of participatory R&D.

PID is not only or even primarily an approach to Research but rather an approach to Development. Most of the PID that is happening today is being done by farmers together with development agents – usually without the involvement of formal researchers. This should be encouraged, as it will not be possible for formal research to work together with the millions of small-scale farmers in remote, marginal and highly diverse areas throughout the world. In such areas, "blanket" solutions cannot be applied. Local experimentation is necessary to see if new external ideas – whether from other farmers or from formal research – can fit the local setting. Moreover, conditions are constantly changing, so all farming communities need to be able to adjust to these changes. Therefore, local innovation by farmers must be a never-ending process. PID is intended to strengthen this process.

The local-innovation approach is an entry point to PID that starts with looking at what farmers are already trying, in their own efforts to solve problems or grasp opportunities they have already identified. The joint situation analysis by community members and outsiders is based on these concrete examples. Local innovations become foci for community groups to examine opportunities, to plan joint experiments to explore the ideas further and to evaluate the results together. This process, around concrete joint activities, helps to strengthen community organisation for development.

Institutionalising “innovative” paths

Spreading and institutionalising this participatory way of carrying out agricultural R&D requires the concerted action of all major stakeholders. Alternative and pioneering NGOs cannot do the job alone. They have to establish a dialogue and engage in a joint learning process with governmental agencies (ministries, universities, extension services), farmers and their organisations, other NGOs and the profit-oriented private sector. All stakeholders involved need to change their mindset and become willing to communicate constructively with each other, to listen and to learn, and – hopefully – find ways to work with each other towards a common goal. There is bound to be some hesitation on the side of at least some of the stakeholders to venture into a partnership in which dialogue and consensus are expected and

openness and transparency are requested. The potential for conflict is ever present. For many of the NGOs, venturing into such partnerships with government agencies represents a fundamental shift in their own approach, as they usually preferred to follow parallel and separate paths in the past.

From stakeholders to partners

In the context of agricultural R&D, the term “stakeholders” encompasses all people who have an interest in the production and consumption of food and other agricultural products. These include – in addition to the primary stakeholders: men and women farmers – research and extension agencies, education and training institutes, government policymakers, the private sector (e.g. involved in input supply, processing, marketing and consultancy services), consumers and civil-society organisations. In contrast, “partners” are those actors who jointly plan and implement activities to further the agenda that is, ideally, negotiated by all of the above-mentioned stakeholders. In order to be able to collaborate, the partners mobilise and share resources and agree on how these will be managed.

The focus in PROLINNOVA is on building national-level platforms where the different stakeholders in agricultural R&D meet and jointly work out the objectives and activities of a particular Country Programme, in an attempt to bring stakeholders into partnership.

Röling and Jiggins (1998) regard “platforms for resource use negotiation” to be useful in conditions that “require building institutions and a capacity for collective learning and decision-making about the ecosystem perceived to be under threat”. The PROLINNOVA platforms are dealing not with a specific ecosystem, but the same principles apply in the sense of building collective learning and decision-making about use of resources within an R&D system to improve the livelihoods of rural people. The concept of “platform” is based on the principle that a space for negotiation should be created in situations where a diversity of actors define and struggle for the same set of resources yet depend on one another for the realisation of their objectives. Within these platforms, the different actors would be able to establish dialogues and clarify points of view. Those dialogues are supposed to facilitate joint planning, or at least the creation of coherent plans.

Within the national-level platforms for promoting participatory R&D being established under PROLINNOVA, “the multi-stakeholder processes ... can contribute to a higher likelihood that agreements will be implemented as the stakeholders themselves have been involved in the creation of the agreements” (Dodds, 2002).

PROLINNOVA - Promoting Local Innovation

The emergence and development of PROLINNOVA

The concept for the PROLINNOVA initiative emerged in December 1999, when representatives from Northern and Southern NGOs and some researchers met in Rambouillet, France, to discuss ways to forge global partnerships in agro-ecological R&D. The group asked ETC Ecoculture (Netherlands) to coordinate further development of the PROLINNOVA proposal and to seek funding support (Rambouillet, 2000).

Since then, the PROLINNOVA initiative grew gradually through various small, separately funded activities. A strong boost came in late 2002, when the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) provided financial support for NGOs in Ethiopia, Ghana and Uganda to facilitate the building of R&D partnerships around promoting local innovation in each of these countries. NGOs in several other countries – Cambodia, Nepal, South Africa, Sudan and Tanzania – also developed proposals for facilitating participatory design of PROLINNOVA programmes at national or subnational levels. Parallel to this, the IFAD support to agricultural development in Niger was re-oriented in the direction of PROLINNOVA. Together, these nine countries succeeded in gaining support from the Netherlands Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS) to cover part of their planned activities, as of January 2004.

As already pointed out, the overall objective of the PROLINNOVA programme is to develop and institutionalise partnerships and methodologies that promote processes of local innovation in ecologically-oriented agriculture and NRM. Efforts are being made to scale out and up (IIRR, 2000): horizontally, by involving more people and organisations within each country and in an increasing number of countries; and vertically, by targeting higher levels within institutions concerned with R&D in agriculture and NRM at national and international level. In this way, participatory approaches that build on local innovation are to be integrated into formal research, extension and education.

Multi-stakeholder platforms are being created at national level in order to achieve this. In each country, a local NGO is facilitating the process of building partnership between the major groups of stakeholders in R&D for agriculture and NRM (farmers, research, extension, education, NGOs etc). This process includes the creation of a National Steering Committee (NSC) composed of representatives from governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in agricultural R&D. They agree to come together because they recognise opportunities to achieve some of their own aims through the PROLINNOVA agenda, which they themselves are shaping by designing their own Country Programme (CP) for promoting participatory R&D building on local innovation.

The CPs are supported by an International Support Team (IST) made up of four organisations: the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) based in the Philippines, ETC Ecoculture, the Centre for International Cooperation at the Free University of Amsterdam (CIS-VUA) and the Swiss Centre for Agricultural Extension (LBL). Their roles include international coordination, administration, capacity building, methodological support, advocacy, web-based knowledge management, documentation and publishing, and encouraging mutual learning through analysis of experiences.

Further major stakeholders in PROLINNOVA at the international level are the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) and the donor agencies. The GFAR has been mandated by development-cooperation donors to facilitate the involvement of all major stakeholder groups in setting priorities for and in implementing and evaluating agricultural R&D programmes. This work is coordinated by the GFAR Secretariat, which was asked to give special attention to strengthening the contribution of the weaker stakeholder groups – farmer organisations and NGOs – in these processes. PROLINNOVA is the first major initiative from the NGO stakeholder group under the GFAR to build a “Global Partnership Programme” for agricultural R&D, and the GFAR Secretariat has encouraged this initiative from the outset.

The donor agencies that are supporting the PROLINNOVA programme and/or have supported various activities leading to its creation include IFAD, DGIS, Misereor, CTA (Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation – ACP-EU), World Bank, Rockefeller

Foundation, the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the NGO Committee of the CGIAR. They all have a stake in the PROLINNOVA approach, because they see it as a means to achieve their development objectives, for example, by strengthening the approaches in existing country projects, in the case of IFAD, or by exploring new ways to realise the agenda of the Convention to Combat Desertification, in the case of DGIS.

Country-specific programme development

The PROLINNOVA initiative is growing in a decentralised way, based on initiatives at national or subnational level. In the three countries that received funding from IFAD in 2002–03 for participatory design of PROLINNOVA, national workshops were convened to analyse some of the local experiences in recognising farmer innovation and informal experimentation and engaging in PID. On this basis, the NSCs have worked out national action plans to improve and scale up methods of PID.

The national action plans differ, depending on the experience and self-identified strengths and weaknesses in engaging the dynamics of local knowledge in PID and in scaling up the approach. However, they have some elements in common, planned in country-specific ways:

- making an inventory and database of initiatives and organisations involved in promoting local innovation
- building capacity to identify and document local innovations and innovation processes and to engage in PID
- stimulating partnerships among farmers, extensionists and – wherever possible – formal researchers, including university staff, in implementing PID on the ground
- participatory monitoring and evaluation of joint activities, outcomes and impacts
- facilitating multi-stakeholder platforms for learning through joint analysis of on-the-ground experience
- on the basis of concrete examples of PID in the country, raising awareness and engaging in policy dialogue to create favourable environments for this approach.

Partners in several countries involved in PROLINNOVA are interested in exploring and building up new funding mechanisms, based on equal partnerships by stakeholders in R&D – including farmers – in decision-making about the use of funds. Pilots are being prepared in setting up national “Local Innovation Funds” governed not just by “experts” but also by farmers. In this way, mechanisms are to be developed and expanded to give farmers influence over formal research, extension and education. This will bring about a shift in power relations between stakeholders in agricultural R&D.

The CPs function autonomously but seek inspiration and mutual support from each other. They want to learn from each other’s experiences and to join forces to influence practice and policy both nationally and internationally. It is within the CPs that the most critical partnerships are being built and where the greatest facilitation skills are required. In the following section, we focus on the roles that local (i.e. national) NGOs are playing in this process of building multi-stakeholder partnerships to promote local innovation and to integrate PID into organisations of research, extension and education in agriculture and NRM.

NGOs catalysing change

The NGOs that were involved in initiating PROLINNOVA have long recognised the potential of building on local knowledge and innovation, combining this with relevant external knowledge, so that resource-poor farmers can improve their livelihoods in a sustainable way. To be able to

promote participatory approaches to agricultural R&D that bring the two knowledge systems together, partnerships between individuals and organisations involved in agricultural R&D need to be built. Over time, development-oriented NGOs realised that the lack of or weaknesses in such partnerships has been a major reason why formal agricultural R&D has been so slow in improving the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers. They see that much more needs to be done so that institutions of research, extension and education in their countries will and can include participatory approaches as part of their regular activities. These NGOs now give high priority to closer interaction with government agencies so as to capitalise on potential synergies and to make the government agencies – and themselves as NGOs – more accountable to the local people and organisations they profess to serve.

There have been many attempts in the past to establish research-extension-farmer linkages, but these have usually been undertaken by government organisations, often in the framework of donor-driven projects. Partnerships need to be built up gradually and with sensitivity. Potential partners need time to understand each other, to recognise and accept each other's strengths and weaknesses, to know what can be expected of each other, to venture into joint activities and to learn from reflecting on the process together. Here, good facilitation is key to allow communication and learning.

The PROLINNOVA programme is based on the assumption that NGOs are in a good position to help build partnerships in agricultural R&D by facilitating “interactive processes for social learning, negotiation, accommodation and agreement” (Röling and Jiggins, 1998). Through their long experience of direct interaction with farming communities, NGOs can play a bridging role between farmers and formal research. Many NGOs have developed skills not only in technical terms but also in social issues such as organisational development, conflict management and gender sensitivity. In the PROLINNOVA programme, NGOs are assuming the role of facilitation within and between CPs and between the local and global spheres.

The NGOs facilitating the PROLINNOVA CPs are well aware of the complexity of the task they have taken upon themselves. Through the international action-learning platform of PROLINNOVA, the CPs seek mutual support by sharing and analysing their experiences in building up multi-stakeholder partnerships to promote participatory approaches to agricultural R&D in their countries and jointly elaborate strategies to deal with the difficulties they face in this process.

Challenges in partnership building

The experiences of the CPs were discussed in detail during the first International Workshop on PROLINNOVA, held in Ethiopia in March 2004. Despite the diversity of organisations present and the heterogeneity of their experiences, the workshop participants discerned some common patterns and challenges in partnership building and discussed how the challenges could be overcome:

- *Changing attitudes and values of partners.* The workshop participants agreed that an effective way to build commitment and to trigger a change in mindset was to learn together on the basis of jointly implemented activities on the ground;
- *Differences in pace of partners.* The different paces of the stakeholder organisations need to be respected. The workshop participants pointed out, for example, that drafting of contracts and memoranda of understanding (MoU) should not be hurried. Sufficient time should be taken to gain a common understanding of the goals and strategies they want to

pursue together and to identify factors and conditions for transparency and accountability, in order to ensure that the process is jointly owned by all partners;

- *Compensation.* Ways have to be found to provide adequate compensation and reward to all (active) members for the energy and drive they bring to make the partnership work. This is not necessarily or only in the form of money for carrying out activities under the programme. Actors must be clear about what benefits they can expect to gain from a partnership – and what they are prepared to give to others in the partnership. This can include knowledge, recognition, contacts and the satisfaction of doing meaningful work; in the Ghanaian example, “Members perceive the chief benefit to be that of an association with professionals from different backgrounds, which in itself provides stimulus for continuing the partnership” (Bruce et al., 2004).
- *Bureaucracy.* Bureaucracy tends to consume people’s time and energy, eroding the commitment and enthusiasm of partners. Participants discussed ways to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. The example of multi-stakeholder partnership in northern Ghana emphasised the value of keeping many aspects of the partnership as informal as possible (including avoiding forms of address that denote hierarchy). Written agreements need to be signed when funds are being handled, but these should focus on the principles rather than detailed procedures set in stone.
- *Clarification of roles and responsibilities.* Overlapping of roles among the partners is potentially harmful to the partnership, since it brings on board the fear of “stepping on each other’s toes”. It can be a source of inefficiencies, confusion or even conflict. Clarity and transparency in relation to roles and responsibilities must be pillars of the partnership.

Basic requisites for good partnership

In order to achieve effective partnership, the workshop participants stressed the need for:

- *Internal motivation.* The partnerships for institutionalising participatory approaches will be resilient and sustainable only if they are driven by internal momentum and energy – by the genuine motivation of each of the partners – rather than being driven by external donors. It is for this reason that the workshop participants underlined the necessity for own contributions in financial or other terms to the overall programme;
- *Sincere commitment from all partners.* Through personal and institutional interaction and joint work, the different organisations involved learn about each other’s strengths and weaknesses and how their contributions can complement each other. During the process, mutual trust and commitment grow, and the partners assume increasingly ownership and care about the state of the partnership as a means to achieve their own and joint aims. The commitment needs to be, at the same time, to strengthening the partnership and – because the partnership is specifically intended to bring about change within institutions – to pursuing a strategy of change within each member’s organisation;
- *Good facilitation.* This allows stakeholders to come together, to discuss issues, to find common ground and to agree on joint action – i.e. to become partners. In each CP, the facilitating NGO is in a difficult position, as it is keenly concerned with issues in agricultural R&D yet must focus on mediating in the partnership and assuming as neutral a role as possible. The NSC needs to recognise – and the facilitating NGO needs to accept – at what points it is advisable to bring in an external facilitator – someone who understands but is not directly involved in the issues at stake – for key events or special situations, such as for workshops or for resolving conflicts. In several cases, the platforms (i.e. the NSCs)

are hiring coordinators for the specific task of seeing to the good functioning of the national platform;

- *Shared responsibility.* A partnership can function well only if all members realise that it should not and cannot depend on only one individual or one organisation. Responsibilities and leadership must be shared;
- *Openness and transparency.* It is important that, at the very beginning and to the greatest extent possible, all those wanting to be partners make their interests and expectations clear – i.e. make explicit to themselves and to the others what is indeed at stake. The resources that can be made available from internal and external sources and the benefits that could be gained should be openly discussed. This allows the partnership to move together from a common position of understanding and respect for each other's position. Even though this is done at the outset, the experience has been that clarifying objectives and identifying stakeholders and stakes is an iterative process. Good facilitation should encourage continued openness and the freedom to express one's opinion – and openness of the platform to change its composition and structure if and when necessary;
- *Good governance.* A well-defined and transparent governance structure should be put in place, clarifying where and through which process the major decisions within the partnership are taken.

This set of common principles raised by the workshop participants clearly shows a great concern about transparency and accountability. Partners are expected to express their needs and interests, to make clear what their goals are, and how they intend to make use of the platform to reach them. This is one means in which the PROLINNOVA partners hope to avoid conflicts. In the words of one of the CP representatives: “A clear understanding of the roles, responsibilities and benefits expected of each of the partners goes a long way in sorting out potential conflict areas, ensuring the right partners are identified and easier commitment to the activities in the partnership” (Farmer Support Group, 2004).

Dealing with diversity and the inherent potential for conflict

But who are the “right partners” and who identifies them? In trying to build multi-stakeholder platforms to institutionalise participatory approaches to R&D, the NGO facilitators of PROLINNOVA cannot look for partners only within their natural constituency, such as other NGOs with which they have been working together in the past or individual researchers who have an alternative approach – and are therefore often marginalised within their own research institutions. PROLINNOVA is trying to reach out beyond this “circle of friends” to influence and sensitise other domains of practice, constituted by stakeholders who are not traditionally partners – i.e. to other organisations and to other people within their own organisations. Unnecessary conflict (e.g. because of misunderstandings or insufficiently clarified roles) needs to be avoided through appropriate mechanisms, but conflict is intrinsic to the process of building multi-stakeholder partnerships in which – by definition – each partner retains its own interests or “stakes”. This is especially so in a platform with the objective of bringing about institutional change and a shift in the relations of power and influence, in this case, within agricultural R&D.

In each country involved, the PROLINNOVA partners are trying to create spaces for stakeholders to come together and find common ground on which they can work towards a common goal. It is clear that such diverse stakeholders as government agencies, NGOs and farmers will have different perspectives and opinions and that the processes of building and maintaining the

various platforms must go through numerous phases of contesting theories and “truths”, deconstructing beliefs (e.g. about the abilities and roles of different actors in the rural innovation system) and dealing with conflicts. This is part of the learning process.

It was pointed out by Röling and Wagemakers (1998) that “...the institutional and policy changes required for scaling-up successes achieved on a pilot scale, cause strife and conflict for which appropriate communication and negotiation strategies and methodologies are needed.” During the PROLINNOVA workshop on partnership building, the South African participants expressed it this way: “In a multi-stakeholder partnership such as PROLINNOVA, diversity is inevitable and necessary for change and transformation. Different stakeholders will have different and often opposing expectations. Diversity is the starting point from which common ground is to emerge. Actors will need to articulate and embrace each other’s perspectives. However, they also must be able to articulate their reason for partnering. This will form the basis from which a common vision can be developed, as well as a mission statement. Consensus is key in this process” (Farmer Support Group, 2004).

At the very outset of trying to facilitate participatory design of the PROLINNOVA country programmes, the facilitating NGOs have been faced with a dilemma. How to choose individuals to make up the core team and or the National Steering Committee? The agenda needs to be moved forward as rapidly as possible, yet in a way that does not have a negative effect on the quality of the partnership and the achievement of its goals in the long term. If only friendly NGOs and like-minded individuals from other institutions are invited to participate, conflicts can be more easily avoided or solved and consensus can be more readily reached. If, on the other hand, these “friends” want to scale up and institutionalise participatory approaches to agricultural R&D, including changes in mindset and policies, they have to incorporate into the process the representatives of stakeholders who are less known in their partner circles.

Quick and high-quality results on a small scale can be achieved through close partnerships of like-minded individuals or organisations but scaling out and up in line with the principles of participation requires a lengthy process of interaction with “other-minded” individuals and organisations. Considerable time and funds must be invested in this process, which will inevitably involve disputes and demand negotiation by mediators well prepared for this task. The facilitating NGOs need to recognise when it is opportune or necessary to guide the multi-stakeholder platforms through open contesting of roles and power, and when it is possible to negotiate collaboration to further a joint agenda that includes ways of redistributing power.

In building up the CPs, different NGOs have chosen different strategies, depending on the atmosphere for governmental and non-governmental interaction within their countries and on their own confidence in being able to handle complex multi-stakeholder processes. Those that chose to move fairly quickly into interaction with the “other-minded” approached decision-makers in the major R&D organisations in their country. They had to convince the decision-makers sufficiently of the value of the initiative to have individuals assigned to the NSC who could manage to carry out their normal work within the organisation, at the same time as the additional tasks of building up good working relations with other organisations in the platform and, in addition, mobilise awareness and interest within their own organisations. This is a huge set of tasks and sometimes brought the facilitating NGOs into situations where they had to rely partly on “partners” whom they still had to convince of the value of the partnership. In Ethiopia, for example, the NSC has become a microcosm of mediated negotiation that is preparing the members well for entering into the wider arenas of open discussion and dispute in day-to-day life: in meetings to discuss other projects, in seminars and congresses, in

municipal and state-level planning meetings. Moreover, the Ethiopian NSC has chosen the strategy of feeding these wider arenas (e.g. conferences of fairly conventional professional associations related to agricultural R&D) with practical and grounded data and experiences in order to stimulate discussion and catalyse change (Amanuel Assefa, 2004).

Other CPs have chosen to start on “safer” ground: building partnerships of like-minded individuals, creating and providing concrete examples of participatory R&D – albeit initially on a small scale – and then, little by little, “touching” the wider and other constituencies. It remains to be seen which is the more effective and efficient way to sensitise policymakers, researchers, development agents and people in the private sector.

This discussion of strategic choices to start the partnerships in the face of diversity to the point of adversity already reveals how different the PROLINNOVA CPs are. In each country, the specificities of history, existing power relations, economic structures, cultural factors, politics and policies must be taken into account. It is for this reason that each CP must find its own path to move from delivering only externally-developed innovations to promoting local innovation processes on a wide scale. The communication between the CPs – particularly at international meetings such as the recent workshop in Ethiopia – encourages them to face the challenges, risks and potentials of engaging in ever wider arenas of contesting when reflecting on PROLINNOVA’s present and future. PROLINNOVA has a complex task ahead, and discussions such as this can shed light on appropriate steps to take along the way.

As the PROLINNOVA programme advances, the action-learning activities will generate more experience on how multi-stakeholder partnerships can be best facilitated and should, in the process, improve the functioning of these partnerships. Monitoring, analysing and understanding this process is fundamental to the challenge of building a strong programme, so that participatory R&D can indeed be institutionalised, while at the same time providing learning grounds for PROLINNOVA partners and for rural sociologists more widely. The theories built in rural sociology can make an important contribution to these analytical discussions and planning of multi-stakeholder processes, in the same way as the “tangibility” of initiatives such as PROLINNOVA can contribute to the building of sociological theory.

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² “Farmers” is used here as a collective term to refer to all people who produce and/or harvest from plants, animals and aquatic organisms. It includes peasant / family farmers practising cultivation, animal husbandry and/or tree growing, mobile pastoralists, forest dwellers and artisanal fisherfolk, among others.