

Linking Research and Development Actors through Learning Alliances

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SYNOPSIS

Learning alliances view research and development outputs as inputs to processes of rural innovation that are place- and time-specific. Methods and tools will change as users adapt them to their needs and realities. Understanding why adaptations occur, the extent that these lead to positive or negative changes in livelihoods, and documenting and sharing lessons learned are key objectives. The learning alliance approach differs substantially from the common practice of attempting to train development practitioners in new methods through short, one-off training courses. Learning alliances rely on an iterative learning process jointly undertaken among multiple stakeholders with a common interest or goal through a series of learning cycles, typically over 12–24 months. The Central American learning alliance improved connectivity between organizations working on similar topics, provided better access to information and knowledge on rural enterprise development, and access to improved methods and tools. Attitudes have shifted from competition to collaboration as partners.

CONTEXT

Millions of dollars are spent each year on R&D initiatives to improve rural livelihoods in the developing world. Despite this expenditure, rural poverty remains an intractable problem in many places. Among the multiple causes of this situation is the limited collective learning that occurs between researchers, development workers, cooperation agencies, policy makers, and private enterprise. As a result, useful research does not benefit the poor, lessons learned do not influence research, cooperation and policy agendas are less relevant than they could be—and development falters. Starting in 2003, a group of actors in Central America came together to explore how to improve the links between

research and development actors through learning alliances (defined in box 4.34).

OBJECTIVE AND DESCRIPTION

The chosen thematic focus of the Central America learning alliance, consisting of international and local NGOs, an international agricultural research center, a national university, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), was rural enterprise development.¹ Learning alliances were proposed as a process-driven vehicle through which the effectiveness of investments in rural livelihoods could be augmented.

During the first phase of the learning alliance (starting in 2003), process facilitation and knowledge management were managed by CIAT. In 2008, these functions were devolved to the Tropical Agriculture Research and Education Center (CATIE, Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza) in Central America based on a regional agreement and cost-sharing strategy. In its second phase, the Central American Learning Alliance continues to promote sustainable rural economic development, considering the following objectives:

- Facilitate joint learning processes between development agencies, technical and financial cooperation, universities and research centers, and state and private actors, based on the development, validation, and dissemination of strategies, concepts, methodologies, and tools for developing effective rural economic development.
- Enhance knowledge management to influence the design of public and private policies that provide incentives for the development of sustainable rural commodity chains, based on the implementation of research activities relevant to sustainable rural economic development.

Box 4.34 Advantages and Impacts of Learning Alliances

Learning alliances rely on an iterative learning process jointly undertaken among multiple stakeholders with a common interest or goal. Typically, stakeholders might include research organizations, development and cooperation agencies, universities, policy makers, and private businesses. Learning alliances facilitate the development of cumulative, shared knowledge between these stakeholders about what works, what doesn't, and why in temporal and spatial contexts. Shared and accessible knowledge in this sense contributes to improved development outcomes as lessons are quickly identified and learned. Improved links among research and development actors improve both research focus and development practice. As funds diminish, increased efficiency becomes paramount in achieving positive livelihood change. Finally, jointly developed proposals are also more attractive for funding agencies as they have a higher potential for scaling out and up and therefore to achieve broader impact.

A well-functioning learning alliance achieves the following outputs:

- Cumulative and shared knowledge about approaches, methods, and policies that work in different places, cultural contexts, and times (as well as those that do not), and the reasons for success or failure.
- Learning opportunities across organizational and geographical boundaries through the establishment and support of communities of practice around specific topics.
- Synergy among multiple actors by providing a vehicle for collaboration, helping to highlight and develop diverse solutions to problems that may appear intractable to the individual actors.
- Contribute to healthy innovation systems by building bridges between islands of experience, helping to assess how these results were achieved, and what others can learn from these experiences.
- Capacity development for implementing, scaling out, and improving innovative approaches and methods.

Table B4.34 Types of Learning Alliances

Type	Need	Focus
1	Building capacity and skills base	Training and learning to use concrete, practical approaches and proven methods
2	Developing new methods, tools, and approaches	Action-research that generates methodological guides based on good practice, which is then validated through capacity-development learning cycles
3	Generating information that can lead to policy influence	Conventional socioeconomic research to understand principles and lessons across experiences

Sources: Authors and Best, Ferris, and Mundy 2009.

Common principals applied by the market-oriented alliance

Collaborative processes require agreement on certain basic principles to govern collective work. Table 4.9 lists and describes these principles.

Agenda setting

The selection of themes and topics in the learning alliance is based on dialogue among partners to identify knowledge or skill gaps that limit the success of their interventions. Once a topic has been selected, the interested partners define the central learning questions, which may range from basic

development issues to research hypotheses. Partners select a small number of these options for development as full learning cycles. Attempts are made to target areas where partners have both an interest and ongoing projects, to align the learning process with concrete results that are useful for improving existing projects or contribute to the development of new proposals.

Learning cycles: A shared process of documentation and reflection

The learning alliance approach differs substantially from the common practice of attempting to train development

Table 4.9 Key Principles for an Effective Multipartner Learning Alliance

Principal	Description
Clear objectives	Multiple stakeholders have different objectives and interests. A learning alliance is based on the identification and negotiation of common interests, needs, and capacities of participating organizations and individuals. What does each organization bring to the alliance? What complementarities or gaps exist? What does each organization hope to achieve through the collaboration? How can the alliance add value to partner activities?
Shared responsibilities, costs, and benefits	Organizations and individuals participate in learning alliances when: (1) they perceive benefits from this association, (2) transaction costs are lower than expected benefits, (3) benefits from collective action are perceived to be greater than those obtained individually, and (4) results do not conflict with other key interests. Learning alliances seek to benefit all parties. Therefore, transaction costs and responsibilities, as well as benefits and credit for achievements, are shared among partners in a transparent fashion.
Outputs as inputs, documentation, and experience sharing	Rural communities are diverse and no universally applicable recipe for sustainable development exists. Learning alliances view research and development outputs as inputs to processes of rural innovation that are place- and time-specific. Methods and tools will change as users adapt them to their needs and realities. Understanding why adaptations occur, the extent that these lead to positive or negative changes in livelihoods, and documenting and sharing lessons learned are key objectives.
Differentiated but linked learning mechanisms	Learning alliances have a diverse range of participants. Identifying each group's questions and willingness to participate in the learning process is critical to success. Flexible but connected learning methods are needed.
Long-term, trust-based relationships	Rural development processes stretch over many years or decades. To influence positive change and understand why that change has occurred requires long-term, stable relationships capable of evolving to meet new challenges. Trust is the glue that cements these relationships, but develops gradually as partners interact with each other and perceive concrete benefits from collaboration.

Source: Lundy and Gottret 2007.

practitioners in new methods through short, one-off training courses. It involves establishing a series of “learning spaces,” typically over 12–24 months (Best, Ferris, and Mundy 2009).

The development of feedback loops and space for reflection as a way to improve practice is the final method used by the learning alliance. It is implemented through face-to-face meetings as well as web-based tools.

- **Capacity-strengthening workshops** are used to train local partners for implementing new approaches and methods developed by learning alliance partners based on best practice and action-research. Follow-up is provided by learning alliance partners. Results are documented and feedback given to improve these new approaches and methods. This process is critical for action-research and strategic research results to be scaled out and up.
- **Backstopping** is carried out by an alliance member with more experience with a specific tool or approach who pays periodic visits to other partners who are adapting the tool to their needs.
- **Write shops** are used to help distil lessons learned into documents. They are especially useful with partners who have difficulties finding time to write up results from their work. The learning alliance adapted methods and tools developed by IFAD (Berdegué et al. 2002) and Douthwaite et al. (2007) for this purpose.

- **National learning fairs** are based on the Most Significant Change method developed by Davies and Dart (2005).
- **Web-based tools** are used principally for documentation and dissemination among partner agencies.

INNOVATIVE ELEMENT: LEARNING ALLIANCE PROCESS AND TOOLS

The learning alliance approach is made up of four inter-related strategies:

1. **Capacity development activities** seek to strengthen or improve partners' capacities in the selection, use, adaptation, and improvement of specific approaches, methods, and tools. This process is directly linked to specific learning cycles. Capacity building is not limited to training workshops but focused on practical, field-level use, follow-up, adaptation, and improvement, with continuing support as partners implement the prototype. As a result, partners strengthen their ability to use specific tools and approaches, adapt them to their needs, and discern when specific methods might or might not be useful.
2. **Targeted action research** responds to specific knowledge gaps identified with partner agencies. In this strategy, key research questions are identified and fieldwork designed and implemented in collaboration between research and development agencies. Outcomes and findings are shared with other partner agencies, selected decision

makers, and the public in general in workshops and in electronic formats.

3. **Connectivity and knowledge management** strive to increase the relationships that form the basis of the learning alliance. The “densification” of networks and personal connections is critical to the success of the alliance. To achieve this, the alliance makes use of face-to-face meetings, training, and exchange visits, as well as virtual tools such as a website and a list server.
4. **Evidence-based decision-making** in partner organizations, public entities, cooperation agencies, and private firms. This strategy has been markedly less successful than the previous three in engaging nonpartners. Despite this difficulty, the learning alliance partners feel that this is a critical capacity that should be developed to leverage higher-level change based on field results. Work in this direction is being piloted with the public sector in Honduras and Nicaragua (Swisscontact, Catholic Relief Services, and CATIE) and Colombia (CIAT); with cooperation agencies in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic (CIAT, Oxfam Great Britain, Sustainable Food Lab); and with the private sector in Guatemala (Oxfam Great Britain and the Sustainable Food Lab).

BENEFITS AND IMPACT

By 2007, the Central American Learning Alliance had contributed to significant changes in partner knowledge, attitudes, and practices. Evidence showed improved connectivity between organizations working on similar topics, better access to information and knowledge on rural enterprise development, and access to improved methods and tools. Attitudes shifted from competition to collaboration as organizations witnessed that working together enhances their capacity to serve rural communities’ needs and receive cooperation funds rather than undermining it. Rural enterprise development practices and knowledge management have improved, as shown by increased effectiveness in existing projects and more strategic new projects. These shifts in turn contribute to a more efficient innovation system in favor of rural enterprise development, as evidenced by the shared use and generation of information, joint capacity building programs, and large-scale, collaborative projects.

The first phase of Central American learning alliance worked with a total of 25 direct partner agencies and through their networks influenced 116 additional organizations. In total the learning alliance contributed to change in organizations working with 33,000 rural families (approximately 175,000 people) in Honduras, Nicaragua,

Guatemala, and El Salvador. With a four-year budget of US\$499,000, the alliance leveraged an additional US\$990,000 in in-kind and additional funding, exceeding budgeted counterpart funding by a factor of ten. The alliance website (www.alianzasdeaprendizaje.org) is a key site for practitioners focused on rural enterprise development in Latin America.

Strengthened networks and knowledge management contribute to improved processes of collaboration between partners. Partner agencies report the use of methods and tools from the alliance in 46 occasions in ongoing projects. Community-level assessment in 2007 led to the identification of 30 cases of most significant change that highlight the positive impact of these tools on income generation, natural resource management, and the role of women.

This initiative started a new phase in July 2009 when five of the organizations that participated in the Learning Alliance during its first phase—Catholic Relief Services, the Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), the Swiss Foundation for Technical Cooperation (Swisscontact), Oxfam Great Britain, and CATIE signed a Cooperation Agreement for five years to support a Coordination Unit that is being facilitated by CATIE.

This new phase started with the first jointly developed project cofunded by IDRC, “Leveraging Information and Knowledge for Inclusive and Sustainable Agricultural Value Chains Development” (K4ValueChains) with the participation of CATIE, CIAT, Catholic Relief Services, SNV, and Swisscontact. This action-research project aims to leverage the development of sustainable and inclusive value chains through the strategic access and use of information and communication technologies to improve the participation of the poor in overall chain governance and decision making, contributing to value chain competitiveness, sustainability, poverty reduction, and food security.

With the collaboration of the World Bank’s Agricultural Risk Management Team (ARMT) and the Regional Unit for Technical Assistance (RUTA), the learning alliance has also started a pilot learning cycle on price risk management with seven coffee cooperatives in Nicaragua. With a five-year (2009–13) core budget of US\$25,000, the regional learning alliance has already leveraged an additional funding of US\$940,310 for strategic learning, and US\$206,400 for capacity development in Nicaragua, where the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and Lutheran World Relief (LWR) are also participating.

Participation in learning alliances has transformed the work of development partners and has broadened the work of research centers. The changes that the learning alliance

Box 4.35 How Learning Alliances Change the Work of Development Agencies: The Example of Catholic Relief Services

The learning alliance approach has been successfully adopted within Catholic Relief Services' (CRS) Agriculture and Environment Program. It highlighted the interdependence of development actors and how, through partnership and collaboration with appropriate research and development actors, real gains can be made in achieving common goals. The reasons that led to CRS's adoption of the learning alliance approach included:

- A desire to demonstrate the benefits of market-led approaches in relief and development.
- Frustration with the effectiveness of traditional training programs.
- A disappointing record of adoption of innovations in methodologies, technologies, and partnerships based on traditional training methods.
- A lack of feedback in more typical learning processes.
- Insufficient impact assessment and follow-up.

Prior to adopting the alliance approach, almost all the farmer training undertaken by CRS and its partners dealt with a single skill set (for example, how to increase production of a particular commodity, or basic business and marketing skills). CRS and the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) came to understand that self-sustaining growth and development of farmers requires multiple sets of skills. The learning alliance partners also realized that these skill

sets required the integration of several sectors (e.g., microfinance, agriculture, water, and enterprise development).

A research-development partnership was established between CRS, CIAT, and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture–FOODNET in which they pooled agroenterprise skills and expertise with the methodologies and tools that they had been developing to help smallholder farmers link to markets. Together they mapped out an iterative process of learning, putting into practice what had been learned, and then analyzing and reflecting on the results. From small beginnings in East Africa and Central America in 2002–04, CRS is now involved in agroenterprise development learning alliances in 5 regions, with participation of around 30 countries.

In countries where the learning alliance has been most active, CRS agriculture programming has undergone a radical change. Where formerly CRS's attention was narrowly focused on a low-input/low-output, subsistence farming-oriented approach to food security, now CRS programs integrate the goal of enabling small-scale producers to enter competitive markets by identifying market opportunities, strengthening rural enterprise, and converting poorly coordinated supply chains into value chains. Many learning alliance participants sum up this change by saying that they are helping farmers transition from "struggling to sell what they have produced, to producing what sells."

Sources: Author and Best, Ferris, and Mundy 2009.

experience brought to the work of CIAT and Catholic Relief Services are detailed in box 4.35.

LESSONS LEARNED AND ISSUES FOR WIDER APPLICATION

Several important lessons can be extracted from the learning alliance for innovation systems work. A key lesson is the need to increase connectivity and information flows between individuals in a transparent fashion, facilitated by an honest broker. This process is critical to build trust among participants. The experience highlights the importance of individuals as opposed to organizations as well as the need to avoid organizational standard bearers who feel threatened by open

systems where "the competition" also participates. Second, clear and shared objectives, applicable results, personal commitment, and flexibility are key elements. An effective innovation system adds value to individual participants in diverse ways by leveraging a collective motivation to work smarter, learn, and share with others. Finally, the facilitation of an innovation system is an art in itself. The learning alliance taught the partners to value diversity of opinion and tension as a crucible of creative ideas.

In the hopes of contributing to more effective innovation systems in the future, there are also several critical issues and/or errors that can be taken from the learning alliances. These include: (1) the difficulty of selling a process in a project- and outcome-driven context; (2) a lack of causality in

many of the results, which makes evaluation and reporting difficult in more formal channels; (3) an initial excessive emphasis on web-based tools when what seems to work best is face-to-face exchanges to build trust and innovation; (4) the difficulty in securing on-going funding for a sometimes “fuzzy,” demand-driven process; (5) the need to proactively involve more members of the overall food system (such as public policy makers and the private sector) from the outset; and (6) the need for eventual buy-in from key decision makers in the organizational “home” of the innovation system.

Specific interventions highlighted by partner agencies to support innovation systems projects or programs focus on connectivity and information. Key interventions in connectivity include face-to-face exchanges and trust building.

Once a minimum level of trust exists, the use of ICT-based communication tools is useful. Sequencing is important here. Trust is the basic building block without which technical fixes are of limited use. A second key type of intervention focuses on increased information access and flow. Participants in the learning alliance value new ideas about how to resolve constraints, short case studies illustrating the application of these ideas in diverse contexts, access to people with experience using these tools, and feedback mechanisms to share their experiences with others. Investments in simple process documentation (for example, contracting local reporters), knowledge-sharing fairs, and web-based platforms as well as support for write shops to make sense of outcomes are useful here.