What’s in it for me? Ten lessons on multi-stakeholder networks

Keith Sones and Alan Duncan

“Why do people come to these meetings? Probably because concrete innovations emerge from the discussions – they are more than talking shops – the interactions among stakeholders lead to change on the ground…”

Alan Duncan

Between 2007 and 2010, the Fodder Adoption Project (FAP) - funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and coordinated by the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) - adopted innovation systems approaches to address issues around inadequate livestock fodder.

This paper draws lessons on ways to establish and facilitate multi-stakeholder networks on smallholder agriculture in developing countries.

One of the clearest lessons is that different actors participate in multi-stakeholder networks when they can identify tangible benefits, preferably with an early pay-off, that justify their investment of time, effort and resources. Put more simply, the networks must provide positive tangible answers to the question ‘what’s in it for me’?

Across the project countries – Ethiopia, Syria, and Vietnam - such networks worked best in situations with good market access and infrastructure, with a wide range of stakeholders, and where challenges were clear and tangible.

Our experiences highlight the need for a new breed of professional with wide-ranging facilitation and brokerage skills. This has major implications for recruitment by research and development organizations as well as for academic curricula.

The Fodder Adoption Project

The FAP was designed as an ‘action research’ initiative to better understand factors and processes that influence the success of fodder innovations in developing countries.

Its core activities were to develop and support networks that would initiate and diffuse fodder technologies in nine learning sites (villages and districts) in the three countries.
In Ethiopia, the project worked closely with the Improving the Productivity and Market Success of Ethiopian Farmers (IPMS) project at ILRI. In Syria, the project worked with the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, and the Aga Khan Development Foundation. In Vietnam, project partners were the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), Tay Nguyen University, and the IFAD-funded Programme for improving market participation of the poor.

The fodder problem

Globally, over a billion people depend on livestock for their livelihoods. Livestock contribute to household food and nutritional security, constitute a critical source of cash income and savings, complement crop-based agriculture, and serve wide-ranging cultural and social functions. Nationally, livestock contribute to GDP and generate foreign exchange.

Ensuring that farmers and producers have sufficient feed and fodder for their (expanding) herds and flocks is a growing challenge. Fodder scarcity constrains productivity, holds back market development, and can lead to conflicts as communities compete for scarce resources. Furthermore, growing feed is often perceived to compete with food production, forcing difficult choices on poor people.

Forty years or more of research and development efforts focused on addressing feed and fodder shortages have all too often resulted in little evidence of adoption of new technologies or impact on livelihoods of the poor. A new approach was called for.

Multi-stakeholder networks

The project applied an action research approach to the problem of fodder scarcity at the nine study sites. A key tool to mobilise and engage a wide range of actors around the various challenges was the multi-stakeholder network. In Ethiopia, these were called ‘innovation platforms’, in Vietnam they were ‘coalitions for cattle development’ and in Syria they took the form of ad hoc meetings convened amongst stakeholders as and when needed.

What are multi-stakeholder networks?

Multi-stakeholder networks are coalitions of individuals and organizations from different backgrounds who come together to act on problems and opportunities. This typically involves sharing experiences, knowledge, skills, resources and ideas, forging alliances and implementing actions. For us, the objective is to achieve beneficial and equitable outcomes that target poor people.

Members of such a network can include farmers, farmers’ organizations, producers, women’s groups, community and other non-governmental organisations, extension and local government officers, traders, transporters, processors, input and service providers, retailers and wholesalers, agri business, and researchers.

Multi-stakeholder networks evolve over time; members change as incentives and the need for their participation change. While external actors may support the formation of such networks, over time, it is essential that facilitation and management of the network rests with local stakeholders.

The success of these networks should not be judged on whether or not a network is sustainable. They can be established for a specific purpose; they often evolve into other entities such as farmer organizations, cooperatives, or businesses. It is essential that local innovation capacity remains available to address future needs.

Ten lessons

The lessons can be divided into four clusters: Mobilizing stakeholders and establishing networks; facilitating networks; evolution of networks; and the applicability of networks.

Mobilizing stakeholders and establishing networks

Lesson 1: Demonstrating the benefits of technological options and providing learning opportunities stimulates interest in the networks.

In Ethiopia, initial activities such as focus group discussions, farmer field days, formal and informal meetings and promoting and facilitating networking drew in a range of actors - who later coalesced into multi-stakeholder networks.

Lesson 2: People participate in multi-stakeholder networks when they see clear tangible benefits.

For farmers the incentives could be greater productivity, better market access, higher income and improved food security. For the private sector the incentive could be access to growing markets and benefiting from more enabling environments.
For researchers the incentive could be an interesting new experience and the chance to get closer to communities and make a real difference. Given the range of non-traditional skills and outputs, including expert facilitation and brokering, that are needed in such networks, professional evaluation systems need to be adjusted. They also need to recognize that researchers frequently act as network members rather than network leaders – precise outputs and outcomes are more difficult to control. For extension workers the incentive could be to become better at bringing about change. New skills, such as facilitation and brokerage, are needed. For policy and decision makers the incentive could be the opportunity to bring about real change and to have access to real world problems through exposure to grassroots activities.

**Lesson 3:** Technologies need to be low risk and accrue early economic gains.

Poor farmers are understandably risk-averse. Seeing the potential advantages of technologies and their local applicability, such as through farmer participatory trials, allows farmers to better judge the risk level. Similarly, poor farmers cannot afford to invest much labour or wait a long time for investments to yield results. Interventions with shorter-term benefits are likely to be more popular (we recognize that quick wins need to be balanced against longer-term gains and unintended negative consequences). More generally, we note that normal research project cycles rarely accommodate long-term goals: three or four years is common for most projects.

**Facilitating networks**

**Lesson 4:** Linking fodder technologies to livestock value chains enables adoption and sustainability.

To create incentives for farmers, it is essential that production increases can be converted into market gains. Similarly, any inputs required, such as seed for fodder or dual-purpose food-feed crops need to be readily available locally, for which private sector seed companies and agro-vet dealers are key. The whole value chain needs to work for the farmers.

**Lesson 5:** Diverse network actors are needed to turn knowledge into actions and benefits.

It is necessary to clearly delineate the roles and responsibilities of each actor (farmers, extensionists, private traders, researchers, etc.) in a multi-stakeholder network, so they can budget and bring together their resources for joint activities.

**Lesson 6:** While the formation of multi-stakeholder networks may require external involvement, longer term facilitation must rest with local stakeholders.

Establishing and facilitating networks is demanding of time, resources and people. For traditional actors, such as research or extension services, this role often lies beyond their current mandates and skill sets, and these need strengthening. In the longer term, local ownership and management of networks is essential to their relevance and flexibility – ensuring that this happens is a key element of initial network building and support.

**Lesson 7:** Establishing and running effective multi-stakeholder networks requires people with broad skill sets and appropriate mindsets.

Research organizations currently have very few people with the necessary skills, attitudes and experience to take on these roles. While new ‘breeds’ of intermediary brokering organizations are emerging, research and development organizations and extension services need to recruit and nurture suitable individuals – for example with skills encompassing markets, agribusiness, rural institutions, microfinance, systems analysis, conflict management, and facilitation. To meet this growing need, universities need to develop new curricula to meet these challenges.
Evolution of networks

**Lesson 8:** Mechanisms to engage policy makers are essential for policy coherence and scaling up.

For learning to be scaled up and out, the bridge from local to national, from innovation to policy is critical. In Ethiopia, for example, a platform at national level was established bringing together local actors with the Ministry of Agriculture, national and regional agricultural research institutes, private sector, non-governmental organisations, projects and international research organizations. A National Advisory Committee for the project gave direction and linked the project with national research and development priorities.

**Lesson 9:** Successful multi-stakeholder networks are not necessarily ‘sustainable’; they address issues beyond their initial design or they evolve into different entities.

Longevity is not necessarily a good indicator of network success. More critical is its ability to develop new areas of attention or evolve into something totally different. Thus, networks established to address livestock feed issues in Ethiopia also addressed increases in livestock production, transport and market issues, access to artificial insemination and animal health services, and meeting demand for higher performing cross-bred animals. One platform in Ethiopia supported the establishment of a small dairy cooperative.

Applicability of networks

**Lesson 10:** Multi-stakeholder innovation networks work best where there are good links to urban markets, good infrastructure and a diverse set of stakeholders.

Multi-stakeholder networks are not universal panaceas. Within FAP – which focused on market-oriented livestock production - they worked best in sites with better market access and infrastructure and where a wide range of stakeholders, including the private sector, could be engaged. This raises clear challenges for research and development organisations mandated to work with the poor in marginal areas.

**More**


FAP blog http://fodderadoption.wordpress.com

FAP wiki www.fodder-adoption-project.wikispaces.com

ILRI. 2011. Planted fodder as an entry point for catalysing stakeholder action on broader value chain issues – experiences from Ethiopia. http://hdl.handle.net/10568/4749


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On 9 and 10 November 2011, the ILRI Board of Trustees hosted a 2-day ‘liveSTOCK Exchange’ to discuss and reflect on livestock research for development.