

Learning with Innovation Histories

Boru Douthwaite, Alok Sikka, Rasheed Sulaiman, John Best and John Gaunt

Constructing an “innovation history” is a method for recording and reflecting on an innovation process. People who have been involved in the innovation jointly construct a detailed written account based on their recollections and on available documents. The process of preparing this history stimulates discussion, reflection and learning amongst all those involved. Others can also learn, either by studying an individual case or by comparing experiences. Future planning can build on the lessons learned, prepare a shared vision and act as a mechanism for change.

Designed and first tried out by the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture, this method uses two techniques that can be used as group exercises: (a) the “innovation timeline”, which lists the key events in the history of the innovation; and (b) the “actor network analysis”, which identifies the key links between all those involved in the innovation process. This article describes an experience where this method was used as part of a workshop aiming to learn from various cases. The “innovations” studied were unusual partnering arrangements among different organisations.

A joint analysis

Working in partnership is now recognised as a successful strategy for improving livelihoods of the rural poor, as it allows for two or more organisations to make the most of each other’s strong points. However, the formation of effective partnerships can be a challenge. Organisational cultures may reflect the strengths which one member brings to a partnership but may also fail to value the strengths of another partner.

The Natural Resource Management (NRM) directorate of the Indian Council for Agricultural Research and the Natural Resource Systems Programme of the British Department for International Development have both supported research projects that have tried new partnership arrangements, with some good results. Both saw the possibilities of highlighting the lessons learnt by such projects with a four-day workshop, where participants could also explore ways to promote good partnering practices. Similarly interested was the World Bank-funded National Agricultural Innovation Project, which from 2006 will set up associations of different types of organisations to work in partnership to promote rural development throughout the country.

The workshop was held in November 2005 in New Delhi. Its objectives were to identify: (a) the benefits of working in partnership; (b) the enabling and constraining factors; and (c) the policy and research management strategies required to foster partnerships. The workshop set out to achieve these objectives through a joint analysis of four NRM projects, all of which were selected for their innovative partnering arrangements. The group of organisations involved included NGOs, international organisations such as CIMMYT, IRRI, the Aga Khan Rural Support Project, as well as farmer federations, input providers and governmental organisations.

The four projects were analysed using a slight adaptation of the “innovation history” approach – the full version of the approach involves two workshops and writing a description of the innovation history. One adaptation, due to time and budget constraints, was to drop the first workshop and to ask all participants to prepare their timelines and network maps beforehand. One of the authors also interviewed policy makers and senior research managers, looking for their opinions in

relation to partnerships in the context of NRM research and development. A second adaptation was to have a policy panel discussion as part of the workshop: eight senior and mid-level policy makers were invited to react to the workshop’s findings and their policy implications. Participants analysed the projects in the first two days. They then became the resource people on the third day, when other colleagues joined in to help the group prepare for the panel on day 4.

What actually happened?

The first phase of the workshop brought together representatives from each of the organisations involved in the case studies (some 25 participants in all). The plan for the first day was to split the participants into their four respective groups to develop a single combined timeline for each case study in the morning, and similar combined actor network matrices in the afternoon.

This generated more debate than expected, as the participants in each group discussed their differing views of what happened.

The first group, for instance, learnt a lot by exchanging opinions regarding the importance of leadership, while the second group identified the importance of being flexible with budgets. Many partnership lessons could be drawn out from this discussion, although it was not possible to finish the actor network matrix exercise. The lessons were then grouped under four headings:

- a) *time*: significant time is required to build relationships (between 3 and 6 years); policy makers, donors, and others do not realise that it takes time to build trust between colleagues;
- b) *flexibility*: working in new partnerships creates potential for research and flexibility to respond to demands; it is necessary to allow for mid-term corrections; project management must be flexible; flexibility must be built into project documents; government institutions are restricted by guidelines and so are not flexible;
- c) *leadership*: importance of strong leadership to push for flexibility; and
- d) *conflict*: recognition that conflicts are inevitable and that methods are needed to sort them out and maintain communication.

We began day two by splitting the participants into two groups, with each group made up of people from all four case studies. We presented each group with the list of lessons learnt from day one and then asked each group to: (a) give more details, add to, or question the lessons and the headings assigned to them; (b) identify evidence from each of the case studies; and, (c) identify benefits of working in partnership and how to measure these benefits. One group ended up working on the first two points, while the second group concentrated on the last one. This was all presented during the third day, when the group was joined by other NRM researchers and development professionals. After a general discussion, all participants were asked to write on a card the policy question they would most like to put to a senior policy maker. The facilitators grouped the questions into categories and presented them. Participants were asked to look at these questions, and prepare for the panel discussion, which took place during the last day. The panel, formed by four senior and mid-level policy makers, was asked to comment on the changes needed to the existing systems to make the forming of partnerships easier, to nurture existing partnerships, and to enable the scaling up of partnerships.

Results, feedback and evaluation

Adoption of the “innovation history” method proved useful. We were able to present clear conclusions, such as those referring to:

- complementarity and comparative advantage: the strongest

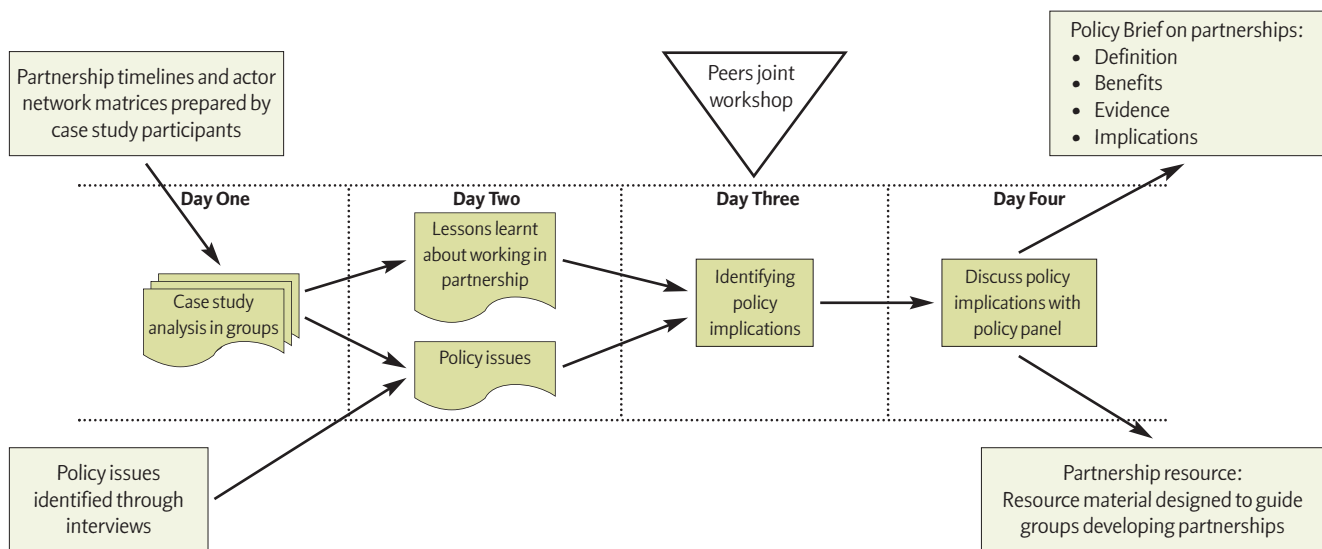


Figure 1: Organisation of the Workshop.

partnerships are those that explicitly recognise and build upon the strengths of the partners;

- building relationships with farmers: successful partnerships depend on the integration of communities in the planning and implementation of partnership activities;
- leadership: successful partnerships are characterised by having vibrant and dynamic leaders, but they usually embrace the principle of decentralised decision-making;
- public-private partnerships: building formal and informal relationships among key public and private stakeholders can help agricultural research organisations achieve the objectives of agricultural research partnerships; and
- transparency: successful partnerships are characterised by openness in planning, decision-making and financial management.

These conclusions were reflected in the policy brief and in the resource materials for working in partnerships which were presented as a final product of the workshop.

The workshop was also successful in the eyes of the participants. We asked for feedback and reflected on how the workshop was progressing, through a barometer group meeting after the first day, an after-action review carried out by the facilitators on the third day, and also through an end-of-workshop evaluation. Participants, for example, said they liked the workshop structure, and its flexibility, which they felt led to real participation and a free and honest exchange of ideas. This flexibility was partly a result of on-going discussion amongst the facilitators and key resource people about how the workshop was progressing, and also of the long discussions between the facilitators in planning for the following day.

The policy study carried out before the workshop was useful and created an awareness of the workshop and its outputs amongst the policy makers and senior research managers. The timeline exercise worked well. It stimulated dialogue between case study resource people, in particular those from different organisations, as to which were the significant events, and why. Asking case-study participants to identify the people related to each significant change encouraged them to think about partnerships without necessarily having to construct the actor network maps. Having other researchers join the workshop helped to focus the work of the first two days, and the same can be said of the final panel session. Presenting their findings first, and then analyzing these further in preparation for the policy panel, helped build ownership amongst participants. The interaction with the policy panel itself

immediately began the process of communicating the workshop findings to policy-makers.

What to change next time?

The main dissatisfaction voiced by participants was with the facilitation and attendance at the policy panel session. People felt that the discussion could have better addressed the issues identified in the first three days of the workshop. Our expectation was that the panel discussion would help workshop participants learn about policymaking and how to influence it, in order to refine the planned policy briefs and materials. In this respect, the workshop was successful. However, having strongly focused on policy messages and key issues, some participants expected the workshop to lead directly to policy change, and that pathways to that change would be explored. At the same time, some participants were disappointed that some of the more senior members invited to be part of the panel were absent.

Quite a lot of time and effort was spent on preparing individual timelines and actor network matrices before the workshop. The idea was to give a voice to people who could not attend the workshop. But actual preparation of these inputs was patchy, and they created a false expectation that individuals would have an opportunity to present their projects. More time and resources should be allowed for advising on and following up the preparation of these inputs prior to such a workshop.

These difficulties, however, are minor when compared to the overall results. The adaptation of the “innovation history” method to a single workshop was judged by participants and facilitators as something that worked well and is worth repeating. It has the important advantage of being much cheaper and quicker than the full method, while still being able to highlight and share lessons from innovative experiences. As such, it provided space for the representatives of the organisations to track and analyse the institutional changes needed to make the innovations (the partnership arrangements) effective and then to communicate their findings to a wider audience.

Boru Douthwaite. Senior Scientist, International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). A.A. 6713, Cali, Colombia. E-mail: b.douthwaite@cgiar.org

Alok Sikka. Director, ICAR, Indian Council of Agricultural Research, Research Complex for the Eastern Region. WALMI Complex, Phulwari Sharif P.O., Patna 801 505, Bihar, India

Rasheed Sulaiman. Senior Scientist, ICAR National Centre for Agricultural Economics & Policy Research. Library Avenue, PUSA, P.B. No. 11305, New Delhi 12, India

John Best. Senior Research Fellow, International and Rural Development Department (IRDD), University of Reading. P.O. Box 237, Reading RG6 6AR, U.K.

John Gaunt. Director, GY Associates Ltd. 32 Amenbury Lane, Harpenden AL5 2DF, U.K.