



**International  
Institute for  
Environment and  
Development**

Sustainable Agriculture  
and Rural Livelihoods  
Programme

Gatekeeper Series no. 98

**Learning Our Way  
Ahead:  
Navigating  
institutional change  
and agricultural  
decentralisation**

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**Clive Lightfoot, Ricardo Ramírez,  
Annemarie Groot, Reg Noble,  
Carine Alders, Francis Shao,  
Dan Kisauzi and Isaac Bekalo**

2001

# Submitting papers to the *Gatekeeper Series*

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Submitted material must be of interest to a wide audience and may combine an examination of broad policy questions with the presentation of specific case studies. The paper should conclude with a discussion of the policy implications of the work presented.

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*Gatekeepers* must be short, easy to read and make simple, concise points.

- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Keep language simple.
- Use the active voice.
- Use a variety of presentation approaches (text, tables, boxes, figures/illustrations, bullet points).
- Length: maximum 5,000 words

## Abstract

Authors should also include a brief summary of their paper – no longer than 450 words.

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Gatekeeper Editor  
Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Livelihoods Programme  
IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK  
Tel:(+44 020) 7388 2117; Fax: (+44 020) 7388 2826; e-mail: sustag@iied.org

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Clive Lightfoot, France (clive.lightfoot@agropolis.fr); Ricardo Ramírez, Canada (rramirez@uoguelph.ca); Annemarie Groot, the Netherlands (Annemarie.Groot@alg.vlk.wau.nl); Reg Noble, Canada (regnoble@web.net); Isaac Bekalo, Kenya (bekalo@iconnect.co.ke); and Carine Alders, the Netherlands (C.Alders@inter.NL.net) are members of ISG, the “International Support Group: Linking Local Experience in Agroecosystem Management”, a decentralised professional association registered in the Netherlands. The ISG’s website is <http://www.ids.ac.uk/eldis/isg/isg.html>

Francis Shao works for FANRM Research Consultants, Tanzania (fshao@muchs.ac.tz) and Dan Kisauzi works for NKOOLA Development Associates, Uganda (dankisauzi@nida.or.ug).

2001

# Executive Summary

The current move towards decentralisation and privatisation of agricultural services in many East African countries is requiring many organisations and individuals to 're-invent' their roles and responsibilities. Government staff at many levels, private input suppliers, farmer organisations and researchers all face the challenge of reduced government budgets whilst needing to become more responsive to the agricultural community. There are no blueprints for the new organisational and administrative arrangements. A new approach is needed which can bring together a broad range of stakeholders unaccustomed to working with each other and help them decide on the types of initiatives needed. This paper describes several experiences from East Africa and elsewhere where coalitions of different agriculture-related organisations at different levels have been using a learning process for collective planning and innovation.

The learning process follows five phases: defining future agroecosystems; matching farmer demands with the services needed to create those agroecosystems; negotiating new partnerships; taking action; assessing the actions taken; and assessing the performance of new partnerships. The five phases are part of a continuous cycle, with all stakeholders constantly monitoring agroecosystem and partnership performance, identifying weaknesses and taking new action to improve performance further. The emphasis of the approach is on joint learning, since no single organisation can come up with all the solutions required and everyone stands to gain from improved co-ordination.

Policy change is needed in two areas if this learning approach is to be adopted and sustained: support for farmers contracting agricultural services, and support for bottom-up community-based planning. The first will create the conditions for effective and efficient service provision, while the second is an essential ingredient for sustainable natural resource management, improved livelihoods and effective local governance. There are implications for the way many agriculture-based organisations operate, but in particular it means that donors need to review their lending and engagement approaches. A learning process such as this requires support from donors willing to engage in action learning and willing to become active partners. They need to become committed to a process that may be slow and where the immediate outcomes are not the tangible, quantified indicators of traditional logical frameworks. More flexible funding mechanisms are needed, and this often means making small amounts of resources available locally to enable learning groups to work collectively.

# LEARNING OUR WAY AHEAD: NAVIGATING INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND AGRICULTURAL DECENTRALISATION

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Clive Lightfoot, Ricardo Ramírez, Annemarie Groot, Reg Noble, Carine Alders, Francis Shao, Dan Kisauzi and Isaac Bekalo

## Introduction

Many East African governments are in the process of decentralising and privatising agricultural services like extension and the supply of inputs. Some of these services are now offered by local government offices. NGOs, farmer organisations or private companies provide other complementary services, and donors are providing significant funding to support decentralisation. The logic behind these policies is not only to reduce government spending by sharing tasks and narrowing responsibilities, but also to provide better targeted and more efficient services to achieve ecologically sound and socially equitable agricultural development. As a result, many people involved in agriculture have assumed new roles, responsibilities and partnerships. District and lower level staff are now asked to respond to farmer demands and form partnerships with other public and private service providers to meet those demands. They are supposed to take over planning, financial and administrative functions previously carried out by national government.

As organisations take on new responsibilities, relationships among them change. Who is accountable and on what grounds become relevant questions; yet there are no set guidelines to help people assume the new roles. These new roles and partnerships need to be invented and adjusted. In other words, people need to learn their way ahead. Given the interdependency of the roles and functions of the various organisations in agricultural development, learning about these roles cannot occur in isolation. Organisations at different levels unused to collaborating together need to learn about each others' interests, perceptions, opportunities and constraints through intensive interaction, dialogue and negotiation. Moreover, responding to farmer demands requires considerable flexibility and dynamism from many of these organisations. This process is hard, slow work. Someone needs to facilitate the dialogue and help build viable inter-institutional partnerships among the organisations involved.

The only way forward for donors, central and local government officers, and project participants is to invent new ways of working together. How to create farmer demand for services and how to form viable partnerships is rarely a subject of research. There are few success stories and best practices on which to build. This is partly because local

conditions and complexities require a level of on-site innovation that cannot be satisfied by emulating 'best practice'. This is not to say we start everywhere anew, but good practice does need to be adapted to local conditions; it needs to be re-invented by those involved.

In this paper we describe several experiences from East Africa and elsewhere where we have been developing a learning process for collective planning and innovation in an attempt to make agricultural services more appropriate to farmers' needs. For the sake of easy reading, we called our learning process 'linked local learning'. However, the essence of a learning process is that it is re-invented by new learners all the time. Each learning group will find their own label for their learning approach and thus take ownership over the process.

### What is the Learning Process?

The goal of our learning process is to enable local institutions to provide appropriate services for small-scale producers practising sustainable agriculture. There are three main objectives:

- 1) to promote more responsive service provision;
- 2) to strengthen the capacity of community-based organisations involved in farming to demand and access agricultural services; and
- 3) to influence policies and environmental legislation towards more consultative and sustainable natural resource management plans.

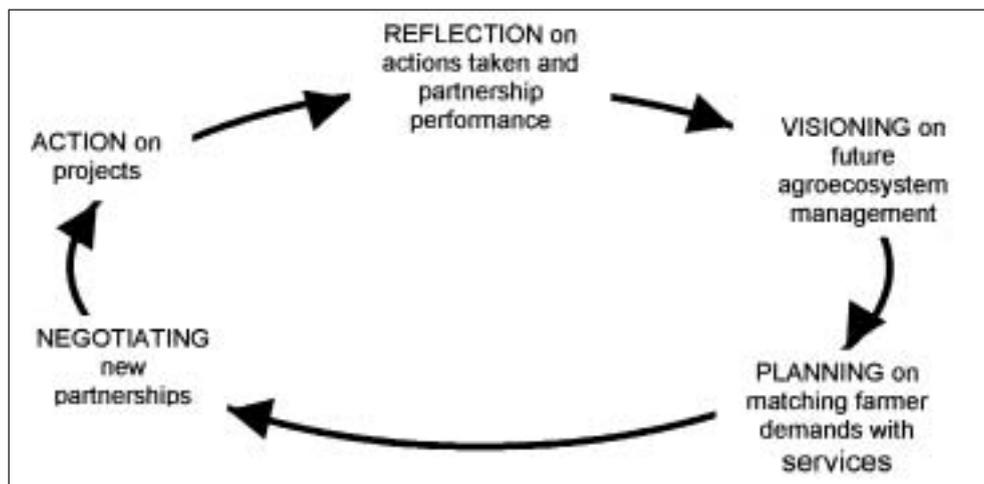
While most other participatory methodologies<sup>1</sup> focus either on the social *or* on the agro-ecological dimensions, this process weaves together biophysical and social information about the agroecosystem as a first step in collaborative learning. The process moves beyond simply understanding and documenting what is happening to an agroecosystem. It is a way for organisations to learn, act and reflect collectively on desirable future goals. The emphasis is less on report writing and information collection than on *the learning that arises out of discussions* based on simple methods, such as agroecosystem mapping, designed by those involved.

Reflection is central to the learning process. This means that people must want to *learn*, rather than want a *report* or *project intervention*. Enabling people to enter into the learning process with this expectation is an important challenge and learning is helped by the use of soft systems tools, such as Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Knowledge Systems, RAAKS (Engel and Salomon, 1997). This learning process further assumes that action and follow-up can only occur by engaging a wide number of stakeholders within and outside the community. This linking dimension means that learning will

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison between this learning process and other approaches, such as RRA and PRA, refer to Lightfoot, et al., 1999.

Figure 1. The learning cycle



only take place when key stakeholders across a number of social, sectoral and administrative levels are brought together. This interaction is central to several approaches that seek to accommodate multiple stakeholder interests (Ramirez, 2001).

The approach also differs from other approaches by emphasising ownership of the process. Ownership here means ‘owning’ a problem situation (being a stakeholder in an issue) and owning the resources to address it. A coalition of stakeholders must be in control from the start, and they invite in outside facilitators who may help find resources but must be able to give up control of a project. As local coalitions gain experience and confidence in assembling proposals and managing budgets, the degree of ownership over the process will increase. In our experience the learning process will simply not work if rural communities and local stakeholder coalitions do not feel fully in control of the process.

### How Does the Process Work?

In this section we describe the phases involved in the learning process, and then we describe the equally important institutional conditions for developing learning groups.

ISG (the International Support Group: Linking Local Experience in Agroecosystem Management) helped local stakeholder groups create a learning process to guide the decentralisation of agricultural services in Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. ISG is a professional association and not a consulting firm with staff on salary, but rather a workspace for its members. This was essential for allowing it to shift ownership of resource acquisition and budget to the local coalition, and to await a mandate from the coalition before it facilitated the process.

Our learning process has five distinct phases (Figure 1). The first phase starts at the local level with farmer self-help groups and community-based organisations sharing

### Box 1. Farmers' future visions of agroecosystem management



Today's agroecosystem, Soroti District, Uganda (Source: DSS 1999)



The future agroecosystem, Soroti District, Uganda (Source: DSS, 1999)

These agroecosystem maps prepared by farmers from Soroti District in Uganda clearly show their intention to intensify agroecosystem management (DSS, 1999; ISG, 1999). The present scattered farms with small plots of root crops, few animals and almost no trees will in future be replaced with more intensive farms supporting a more diverse array of crops, including coffee and upland rice, zero grazing cattle operations, fish ponds and citrus orchards. Note that the expected rise in population is represented by a need for more houses, a school, a market place and bigger roads. Croplands will be rehabilitated through soil conservation measures and by consolidating farmland. Grazing lands will be rehabilitated by the introduction of improved pasture species and by using zero grazing to reduce grazing intensity. The wetlands will be designated as conservation areas with irrigation facilities to enhance productivity.

knowledge about the agroecosystems in their areas. They describe how these were managed 30 years ago and today. From these perspectives people model how they would like to see their agroecosystems develop in the future (Box 1). This helps identify the resources, services and support they need to achieve these future visions. This local learning about better ways to manage agroecosystems is enhanced by interactions with district and national level extensionists and researchers.

In the second phase of learning these visions and the requirements of community members are presented to district level organisations at workshops. Here, community members explain which agricultural support services they need and find out which are currently available from district level extensionists and researchers (Box 2). Thus local and district level organisations learn which services match demands and what new services should be created. Where demands go unmet policy issues are raised for the attention of national level policy makers.

When the resources, services and support available match the community's requirements, there is a basis for negotiating partnerships between community members and public or private sector groups, entities or enterprises (Box 3). In this phase the commu-

## **Box 2. Responding to farmer demands for services**

In Kilosa District in Tanzania farmers got together with NGOs and government extension officers at local and district levels to discuss the services they would need to meet their future visions of agroecosystem management (Shao, Mlay and Muro 2000). Some services could be provided immediately; for example, farmers had identified a need for training for pastoralists in improved livestock management. The Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives already offers training to pastoralists. However, for pastoralists to use this training, they also need to know about group formation and to have clearly demarcated grazing resources. Thus the actions they agreed to take included not only the delivery of the training programme, but also the delivery of a programme on group formation and a programme to demarcate available grazing land and water resources for pastoralists.

Farmers, NGOs and government extension officers also invented a new service for the breeding and multiplication of improved livestock to meet farmers' demands. In order to provide this service participants realised that a complex partnership would have to be formed involving NGOs, central and local government authorities, researchers, and the livestock keepers themselves. A concerted effort among partners will be required to fulfil the array of new roles in research, infrastructure, marketing and regulation the participants decided were necessary for this new service to be successful.

community and local organisations learn to develop partnerships that increase the community's access to the resources and services they need to achieve their goals. This also gives private and public services an opportunity to discuss their mandate, objectives and constraints with regard to meeting community needs. This exchange has proved important for negotiating good partnerships between communities and their service providers.

Following rounds of negotiations partners agree on agroecosystem management strategies. Their implementation forms the fourth phase in the learning process. The hallmark of these actions is that:

- they are directed towards a vision of the future fashioned by local people
- local people are key actors in the implementation of the actions, and
- indicators of performance are established as the partnerships are negotiated

These performance indicators are used by partners to reflect on progress, the fifth and last phase in the learning process. After taking action, partners at local and district level need to reflect on both the performance of their new agroecosystem management strategies (Box 4) and of their partnerships (Box 5). After such reflection, district and local level organisations again revisit the community's visions of how agroecosystems should be managed and what service partnerships are needed. Changes are made as a result of what has been learned and another cycle is started. Learning is thus a continuous process, as indicated in Figure 1.

### Box 3. Criteria for negotiating partnerships

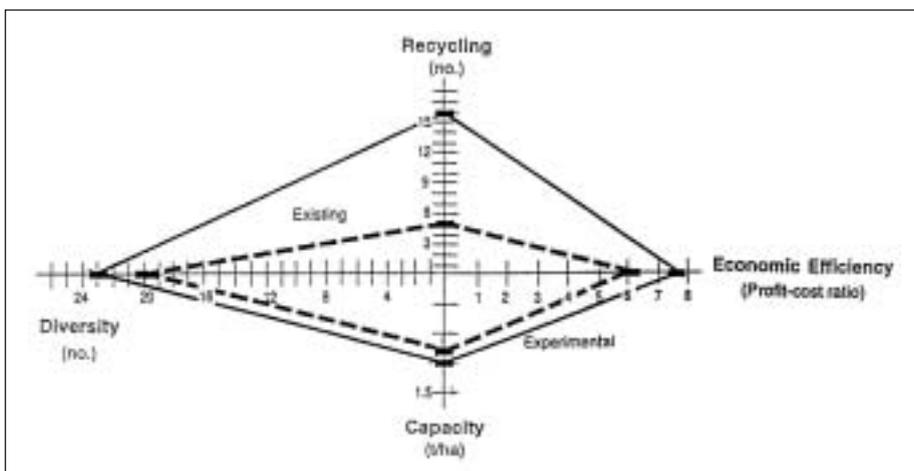
This table was developed by farmers, NGOs and agriculture extension officers from Kilosa District in Tanzania to help them negotiate partnership arrangements (Shao, Mlay and Muro 2000). The number and range of ideas make it easy for partners to select some criteria to use in negotiating their partnership. Trust and communication between partners, transparency in decision making, and awareness creation were agreed to be the most crucial criteria for many service partnerships. The participants agreed that without trust between partners the services may not be accepted, and that if community members were not fully aware of the service then it is unlikely to be used. Communication between partners was also crucial since one-way top down directives do not result in sustainable plans.

CRITERIA	NEGATIVE OUTCOME IF NOT FOLLOWED	POSITIVE OUTCOME IF FOLLOWED
Trust between farmers and service providers	Services will not be readily accepted	Successful service delivery
Co-operation between farmers and service providers	Refusal to accept new technologies; poor participation	Proper joint implementation
Services delivered at the right time	Service delivered late is not worth using	Services delivered on time can be used when and where intended
Awareness creation	Community not involved in development planning activities	Knowledge of development programmes in their community
Knowledge of services needed according to capability	Lack of good environment for good service deliveries	Plans that are acceptable to all partners
Defining clear roles of each partner	Poor relationship between partners	Efficient and proper action by all partners involved
Communication amongst partners	Top down directives	Sustainable commonly agreed plans
Transparency during planning and implementation	Unimplemented directives and orders	Trust between partners
Participation in decision making	Refusal to implement and poor participation	Mutual benefits for partners
Awareness creation of services	Unclear/unwillingness to implement plans	Information/knowledge spread to all

Source: Shao, Mlay and Muro, 2000.

#### Box 4. Reflecting on agroecosystem performance

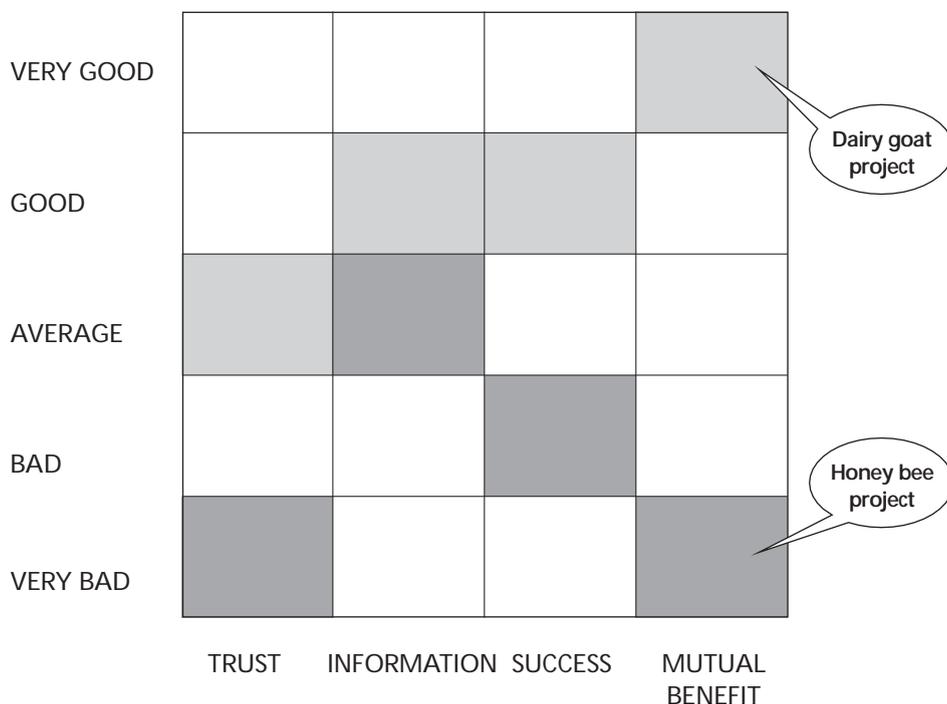
When assessing the performance of agroecosystem management strategies, it is important for farmers to choose indicators that not only make sense to them, but also are easy for them to measure. Farmer indicators assess economic as well as ecological dimensions of performance. Here scoring for economic efficiency uses a simple profit-cost ratio. Scoring for biomass production capacity uses the weight of biomass produced by all species. Recycling of biological wastes is scored using the number of recycling flows, and species diversity uses the number of species cultivated or collected. Performance scores for these four indicators are plotted in a simple four-way kite graph as shown below. It is important that each indicator is arranged on an increasing scale of improvement so that the larger the kite formed the better the performance. Farmers find it easier to use scores where the larger number indicates better performance.



In this example a group of farmers from the Mampong District in Ghana assessed the performance of their 'future' agroecosystem management strategy after one year of implementation (Prein, Ofori and Lightfoot, 1993). The farmers' future vision of an improved agroecosystem management strategy included the rehabilitation of a previously neglected wetland area through improving water flow and collecting water in a small pond. The pond provided sufficient water to stock fish and irrigate newly established vegetable plots. Wastes from all the animals were recycled to the pond and vegetable plot to substitute for chemical fertiliser. After one year, with savings on external inputs, increased products going to market, increased meat and vegetables being consumed at home, and increased internal recycling of wastes, farm gross and net incomes went up by 50%. Cash profits rose to \$8 return on every dollar invested. On the ecological side species diversity increased to 24 species, biomass capacity to 1.4 tons per hectare and waste recycling flows from five to sixteen.

## Box 5. Reflecting on partnership performance

### Assessment of two projects using partnership quality indicators



In Kilosa District, Tanzania, farmers assessed the performance of the partnerships they were involved in some two years ago. Of the two projects assessed, the dairy goat project was judged a success while the honey bee one was a failure. To assess these two projects farmers chose four indicators: trust, information access, technical success and mutual benefit. They also developed a five point scoring scale ranging from very bad to very good. The dairy goat project succeeded because it was technically viable, farmers were given good information on the project and on goat rearing technology both before and during the project, and farmers felt they had benefited greatly from the project. Farmers felt the service providers had benefited as well, but farmers did not develop more than an average amount of trust for the service provider during the project. Farmers felt that while they had received adequate information during the implementation of the honeybee project, the partnership failed. It failed because raising bees was difficult technically, farmers were able to produce very little, and so they did not benefit much. Lastly, throughout the project the partners were not able to build trust for each other.

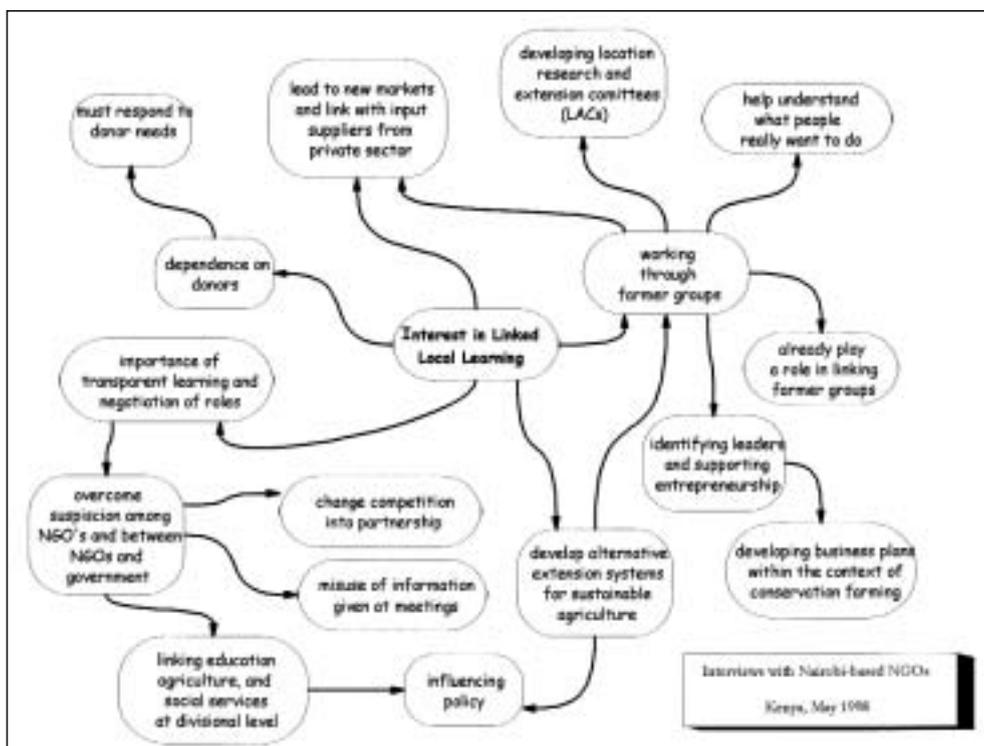
Source: Shao, Mlay and Muro, 2000.

# Developing a Learning Process

We have described the phases and methods of our learning process. However, before any of these steps are taken it is essential first to explore local interest in undertaking a learning approach to decentralisation. Such an approach cannot be imposed, and if there is no interest there is little point in continuing.

We started by exploring interest in the concept in one-week exploratory visits to Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. We had meetings with farmer groups, NGOs (local and international), donors, the private sector and government. Some of the ideas expressed by NGOs in meetings in Kenya are shown in Figure 2. These deliberations helped people to shift easily from a *project* to a *learning* mind-set, and also helped them develop a common understanding of the learning approach because researchers, extension agents, local officials and farmers are often partially isolated from each other by their vocabulary. For example, at a workshop stakeholders at national, district and ward levels in Tanzania discussed and illustrated their understanding of learning (Figure 3). This diagram illustrates a) who learns, b) what they want to learn, c) how they would like to learn, and d) why they want to engage in learning. Tanzanian participants were thus able to explore together the relevance of learning to their situation and how it could potentially empower local communities. This approach quickly established ownership of the process by local

Figure 2. The issues of interest for NGOs in Kenya





commerce. Once again the district coalitions choose representatives to exchange learning with a national level coalition, including representation from ministries (local government and agriculture), education (principally universities and colleges), non-government organisations (national and international), private sector (especially those dealing in agricultural inputs, credit, and chambers of commerce), and donors (bilateral and local).

It is most important that the learning group includes representatives of farmer groups, private sector, research and every level of government. The very fact that they come together and form a group is already a significant accomplishment as there is often mistrust and lack of experience across levels. In Tanzania the group comprises mainly national level organisations, as well as some district officials. In Kenya the group includes representatives from all levels – farmers, district and national levels. They started by getting to know each other, seeking common goals and finding out about possible conflicting interests. This is a first and very necessary step for forming learning coalitions.

Our process of forming learning coalitions increases local stakeholders' ownership of the process. This is because 'champions' (committed, motivated and dedicated individuals) promoted the idea in their organisations and invested their time in the formative meetings of the core groups. While such champions were successful in the countries where we had some resources for meetings, they were not initially successful in Uganda where no resources were available. Champions are vital to the process; in these early stages 'deputised' representatives rarely persevere.

Once a strong core group has been formed the learning process can proceed, following the steps described in the previous section. In Kenya and Tanzania the core groups decided that it was important to begin developing the learning process with communities, where agriculture is a part of every-day life, and from where demands for services must come. As farmer or community-based organisations agree on common objectives for ecologically sound agriculture and forge new linkages among themselves, they gain legitimacy and confidence to negotiate new arrangements with local government and district agencies.

In the short term, we have already witnessed a strengthening of the capacity of civil society as a result of the learning process (Box 6). These skills and the confidence to influence service providers may be a sign of community-based organisations' growing capacity to demand involvement in agricultural policy development. Although decentralisation remains a process designed by national governments, in order to meet local needs districts have to respond to well-prepared demands for changes in policies, resources and responsibilities from their grassroots. The learning process developed at workshops in Kenya and Tanzania addressed this challenge.<sup>2</sup>

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*2 ISG has been documenting every phase of the process throughout the workshops facilitated in East Africa. These 'process documents' include guidelines for facilitators, sample tools and schedules for different exercises, and a large number of photographs of the activities, the illustrations and diagrams. These documents are essentially multi-media learning resource kits.*

## Box 6. Learning outcomes from Kenya and Canada

In Kenya, six months after the learning workshop we heard that participants had been passing their skills onto others and using the facilitation tools they developed to take concerted action across communities in school reform and public health. Farmer groups had got together to improve meat marketing and butchery services by forming LISSA, a grassroots association of those involved in the livestock industry. The learners involved with LISSA are livestock farmers and pastoralists, local NGOs and CBOs concerned with livestock production, local processing plants, marketing groups and commodity exchanges, and consumers. The association focuses its learning on empowering farmers to manage change, fair trade practice (price discovery, price mechanisms), identifying new market opportunities, improving livestock production and management strategies, enhancing the natural resource base for quality production, and developing new technology for quality meat processing. Learning occurs through multi-stakeholder meetings and workshops and continuous communication and information exchange.

ISG was also invited to facilitate multi-stakeholder planning workshops for improved watershed management in Canada.<sup>3</sup> The Maitland Valley Conservation Authority (MVCA) in south-western Ontario was looking for a new way of communicating with its clients. It could no longer 'push' conservation through grants to landowners; rather it needed to engage other local organisations as partners in collaborative planning for improving their watershed environment. The stakeholders involve a wide range of farmers and farmer groups (ranging from conventional mixed family farms, to organic farms and to corporate, input intensive livestock operations), naturalist and ecological associations, industrial groups (manufacturing and resource extraction), municipal and township local governments, local branches of provincial ministries of environment, agriculture and natural resources, and other agency representatives from other sectors. MVCA invited ISG to introduce a learning process that would encourage collaboration in watershed planning among these local interest groups. We followed the same principles as in the Nyeri Linked Local Learning Workshop: provide tools for people to discover common interest, negotiate future visions, visualise information, and determine indicators to track change. After the initial four months, the project participants had divided themselves into three Service Teams with specific mandates (water, agriculture and terrestrial areas) made up of individuals from very different agencies and with diverse perspectives. For two years the teams collected relevant information and learnt to work together. By early 2001 the teams began to engage communities at large and invited ISG to participate and observe. The teams have gained confidence in planning community consultations, in contracting data gathering by consultants, and in handling information as service teams, rather than as passive recipients. One of the teams presented their accomplishments at an international conference held in 2000 at the University of Guelph and co-sponsored with UNDP. The presentation was very well received. This is a clear example of how a learning approach developed in the South can be brought to the North; in future exchanges between Canadian and East Africa farmers may gain a new meaning as they now share a common approach to working in teams and reaching agreements on natural resource management.<sup>4</sup>

*3 For further details on the use of the learning process in Canada please contact Phil Beard at MVCA, Box 127, 93 Marietta St., Wroxeter, Ontario, N0G 2X0, Canada. Tel: 519 335-3557; fax 335-3516; email pbeard@mvca.on.ca*

*4 ISG's experience in Peru provides another complementary experience. Readers are referred to: Lightfoot, C., Fernandez, M., Noble, R., Ramirez, R., Groot, A., Fernandez-Baca, E., Shao, F., Muro, G., Okelabo, S., Mugenyi, A., Bekalo, I., Rianga, A. and Obare, L. 2001. A learning approach to community agroecosystem management. In: Flora, C.B. (ed.). Interactions Between Agroecosystems and Rural Communities. CRC Press, Boca Raton, Florida.*

# Initiating and Sustaining a Learning Approach

Learning will only be sustained if the right organisational ingredients are in place. An organisation interested in facilitating a learning process, and policy makers supporting these organisations, should ask themselves the following questions:

- Can we afford to give up financial control over a project?
- Are we flexible enough to respond to the client?
- Does our mandate allow us, or are we willing to give the learning group freedom of movement?
- Do we see process and change in attitudes as essential outputs?
- Are we willing to train local facilitators to do what we know how to do?

How facilitating groups answer these questions will determine whether they can/or are given the opportunity to facilitate a learning process. One can think of these questions as an 'audit' of the propensity to facilitate learning. Organisations must also seek invitations and mandates to convene and facilitate learning groups. It is the learners who empower and bestow legitimacy on those who convene and facilitate.

Another 'pre-condition' for facilitating learning processes is a predisposition for *learning*. Participants, including policy makers, must come to the process wanting to learn and not wanting the usual project outputs of reports and 'trees planted'. A mindset change is required away from an output, report, product-oriented thinking, towards process-oriented thinking valuing discussion and debate.

After three years of experience we have come across a number of challenges to developing and sustaining learning processes: dynamism, recognition, attitude, credibility, confidence and control. We propose one or two modest practical actions to deal with these challenges. We must caution, however, that none of the actions will be effective in isolation. We also acknowledge that some of these actions may appear daunting for an external facilitator who does not necessarily have the mandate to control such changes. Few agencies are willing or able to delegate control over the process and the resources to a learning group. In such cases the facilitator will do better in other organisations or projects where such conditions exist.

## Dynamism

The challenge for local authorities, service providers and community-based groups alike is to create a suitable environment for innovation and responsiveness to change. For example, if service providers are going to respond adequately to farmers' demands they will need to have the flexibility to create new services and discard ineffective ones. However, many government organisations and farmer organisations can lack dynamism and flexibility.

## Actions:

- Before a learning approach is proposed, the 'champions' of such approaches - who may be willing to represent their organisation within a learning group - should first gain consensus and commitment to the process by their leaders.
- Senior managers at the national level should establish incentives and reward structures for those who suggest new services offered by their organisations.
- Policy makers should give farmers legal power to manage public funds and control agricultural services by direct contracting to force change towards responsiveness to their demands. For example, alternative extension policies, such as the bonus system in Chile (Berdegúé, 1998), can channel resources through farmers to allow them to choose service providers competitively. In Uganda, the NAADS programme is moving in the same direction.

## Recognition

Where senior officials give little priority to learning coalitions, such activities struggle to operate. Often, local government officials interested in developing a learning approach are not given mandates to help form coalitions and they may be too junior to gain support for such innovation. This is in part because it costs time and money to support the workshops, multi-stakeholder coalition meetings, and internal debriefings. Thus, developing learning activities and multi-stakeholder coalitions need to be recognised as important investments for the survival of an organisation.

## Actions:

- Promote awareness amongst staff of local authorities about the value of learning approaches so that learning workshops and multi-stakeholder meetings are given a higher priority.
- Establish incentives and reward structures for those who participate in learning workshops and coalitions.
- Make the outcome of learning activities clear. Showing evidence of previous workshops and sharing statements by policy makers who have been involved can have an impact on senior policy makers.

## Attitude

Attitude is all about how officials, experts, advisors, and others in positions of authority perceive and treat farmers. Too often farmer knowledge and experience lack credibility among agricultural support service providers. The modernisation of agriculture in the minds of most agricultural service providers and local authorities is about the top-down imposition of 'modern' high external input technologies on to 'backward' farmers. The

key stakeholders at district level simply have too little confidence in the organisational and innovative capacities of local community-based groups. These attitudes need to change before farmers will participate in multi-stakeholder learning coalitions on an equal basis and before service providers will contemplate responding to farmers' demands.

Actions:

- Educate local authorities in the attitudes and behaviour required for participatory development.
- Provide training opportunities for local organisations to build skills in facilitating learning processes.
- Give farmers the financial power to contract agricultural support services directly; the very fact that such responsibility exists can bring about a change in attitude.

## Credibility and Confidence

Multi-stakeholder consultations tend to be perceived as little more than 'talk shops'. Without recording and making the outputs of such meetings visible, there can be misunderstandings about positions taken and agreements reached, and this can undermine the credibility of the process.

There are many areas in which lack of confidence is an obstacle. There is a general lack of confidence in lower level staff on the part of more senior officials. National authorities lack confidence in the capacities of district authorities. In turn, district authorities lack confidence in the capacities of local authorities and community leadership. The lack of confidence in farmers is reinforced by their lack of experience in planning and in demanding services. Experiences with learning approaches to date are simply too few to convince either district authorities or the donors supporting them of their value. Similarly, donors insist on their technical assistant overseeing project implementers at district and local levels. This has bred a sense of disempowerment in district and local cadres who feel the need for a 'go' signal before acting, thereby stifling initiative.

Actions:

- Agricultural service providers and local authorities need to explain their mandates and service policies in a way that villagers can understand.
- Participants in learning coalitions need to document positions and perspectives during the consultation process. As the process is documented, participants realise the many steps they have covered, the new insights they have gained, and the skills they have acquired; this realisation gives them confidence to try the learning process in their own settings.
- Participants need to ensure that the outcomes include agreed actions (such as the

formation of new service partnerships), as well as assessment mechanisms (such as performance indicators) which are developed and assessed by all partners in a service partnership agreement.

## Control

Control is all about where decisions, especially financial ones, are made; whether at national, district or local levels. As we signal in Figure 1, learning approaches work best when the learners control the financial resources for learning. However, it has been our experience that the key stakeholders in learning coalitions at district and local level are not empowered. Most decisions, financial and planning, are still controlled by institutions at national level. Central government agencies covering national parks, forests, mining lands, water rights, and land ownership control most decisions about resource access and use. Financing and sources of revenue for the districts are still with central government, though this picture is changing in Uganda, but not in Kenya or Tanzania. NGOs, like government, have their roles defined at national level, and their financing (which is heavily dependent on donors) controlled at national level. Donors all operate at national level through their embassies and have the power to alter local work plans and budgets. Similarly, district authorities can be reluctant to share funds with local NGOs and CBOs. Thus donors and governments need to provide money without strings attached and overcome their fear of losing influence, financial control, and power to local people. A new kind of partnership is needed between donors and recipients; perhaps a partnership built on the kinds of criteria for partnership performance described in this paper.

## Actions

- Donors need to empower district and local learning coalitions to manage public funds and control agricultural services by direct contracting.
- District learning coalitions need to develop transparent mechanisms for tracking their learning and evaluating its impact on new service partnerships and on natural resources.
- District learning coalitions need to develop transparent accounting mechanisms for the funds provided.

As these shifts in organisational orientation take root, the other objectives, such as changing policies, may become more urgent.

## Conclusions

We acknowledge that our experience is incipient; the major accomplishment we can share is evidence of a learning process that holds much promise. It is too early to ascertain the full impact of this approach either on natural resources, or in terms of policy adjustments. Nevertheless, learning approaches offer new opportunities. By creating new partnerships they help farmers, NGOs, government ministries and departments and donors deal with the massive changes being imposed at district and village levels through decentralisation. They help those involved with natural resource management to navigate through their changing roles and responsibilities, and they continue to develop the capacities of farmers. They also enable local institutions to appreciate what is needed to provide appropriate services for small-scale producers.

However, the learning approach has progressed slowly over the last three years in East Africa. This is inevitable, as by its very nature the process takes time. Finding those interested in the learning approach and getting a mandate to facilitate its development was a slow process. The need for ownership of financial resources also slowed things down as the learners had little or no money to bring to their learning and could therefore only afford to hold one consultation session a year. The process of coalition-forming at local, district and national levels was also time-consuming. Learners need time and resources to meet, debate indicators and track changes. That these resources are small, spread over time, and need to have no strings attached exposes a major weakness in the relationship between donors and learning coalitions.

Our learning process requires support from donors willing to engage in action-learning and willing to become active partners. For this donors need to be committed to a process that may be slow and where the immediate outcomes are not the tangible, quantified indicators of traditional logical frameworks. Such donors must appreciate the need to:

- establish farmer-controlled funds for contracting agricultural service providers;
- establish local 'embassy' funds for supporting the emergence of learning coalitions and be responsive to the proposals that these groups put forward to speed up their learning (donor policies to disburse funds exclusively through government agencies and projects run the risk of excluding dedicated inter-organisational learning groups);
- support community-based bottom-up planning processes;
- realise that establishing learning groups with representatives from a wide range of organisations is central to the process and that this can take time; and
- recognise that donors - as stakeholders - need to be part of the discovery process, and thereby need to provide the time and resources needed to become involved.

Becoming involved in a learning process is a humbling experience. Organisations involved quickly acknowledge that agricultural development will only be achieved by

co-ordination across groups and sectors. No single organisation can 'go it alone' or has all the answers. The improvements required need to be improvised; in other words, learning together is the only way forward.

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ISSN 1357-9258