

Strengthening Partnerships in Rural Innovation

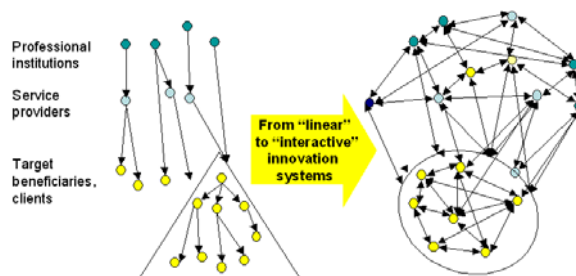
to generate new knowledge, build capacity and facilitate institutional change

ICRA's role

Background

In a globalizing world, the ability of rural economies and societies to generate sustainable and equitable development is becoming increasingly dependent on their capacity to anticipate and adapt to rapid changes in their policy, market, institutional, physical and social environment. This capacity is reflected in their collective ability to deal with complexity and quickly access, generate and effectively use new knowledge for innovation through interactive learning.

Traditional roles, inter-institutional arrangements and processes used to generate and apply knowledge, often based on linear and reductionist paradigms, have increasingly been shown to be ineffective for resolving complex problems. Alternative approaches are thus being developed. Initially these focussed on farmer participation but more recent approaches recognize the need to actively engage a broader range of stakeholders and to span more scales. Several approaches also put more emphasis on marketing and value adding opportunities as entry points for initiating improvements to livelihoods while safeguarding the natural resource base. Examples of recent approaches and the institutions promoting them include: SRL (DFID), ARD (ICRA), INRM (CGIAR), IAR4D (FARA), CASE (IFDC), CORMA (KIT), innovation systems (UNU TECH).



Problem

Introducing, using and institutionalizing new collective approaches to rural innovation by people and institutions who have mostly been trained and operate in linear, 'technology generation and transfer' ways of addressing problems.

New approaches to capacity building and institutional change

Mainstreaming new innovation approaches requires a concerted effort to build the needed capacities (knowledge, skills and mindsets) both in mid-career professionals and in students. But these capacities cannot be built by business-as-usual training programmes and university courses. Institutional innovations that create an enabling environment for new ways of learning as well as for the application of what is learnt are required. Thus, capacity building needs to proceed simultaneously with – and to contribute to – institutional change across a broad range of stakeholders.

- *For educational organisations* this implies new curricula which focus on capacity to deal with complexity, change and multi-actor processes in rural innovation, in addition to enhanced specialisation. This requires a change in institutional culture with a better balance between simply transferring knowledge in class rooms and learning to learn in real world situations, and between promoting individualism and competition on the one hand and teamwork and collaboration on the other. To provide real world learning environments, educational institutions must build effective partnerships with other stakeholders and actively engage in rural innovation systems. As few educational institutions have a tradition of working in this mode, there is a need to develop the capacities of the educational staff to use new ways of learning and to engage in multi-actor innovation processes

(i.e. a need for programmes that build capacity to build capacity – BC2BC programmes).

- For research organisations, service providers, producers, processors and traders, retailers, policy makers and other actors in rural innovation systems this implies that they collectively develop the capacity to establish and do business through innovation platforms. These should provide a sufficiently level playing field for all important actors to play their part and help address common priority issues that none of them could solve alone. Different stakeholder groups need to be capacitated and helped to empower themselves with particular attention given to the less well-organised groups. Multi-stakeholder platforms should provide an enabling institutional environment for both the learning and application of new and collective approaches to rural innovation.

BC2BC programmes in which participants learn to work as a team, apply new approaches to rural innovation with other actors, involve their institutions in innovation platforms and design and adapt learning programmes and materials to local, national and regional needs. ICRA then engages with the capacitated core teams to secure funding and implement learning programmes with partners engaged in innovation platforms to collectively build their capacities to apply and institutionalise these new approaches.



ICRA's role in the South

ICRA stimulates building national level partnerships (innovation platforms) – involving educational and research organisations, extension services, NGOs, farmers' unions and actors in the private sector – to collectively strengthen institutional capabilities to build capacity in, use and institutionalise new multi-actor approaches to rural innovation and interactive learning. Such partnerships do not form spontaneously. They require that partners come together around common problems and recognise that their collective interests are better served by collaboration than by focussing on their individual interests. ICRA is currently active in such initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa – Uganda, South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Benin; in Central America – Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Panama; and in the Maghreb. In response to concrete requests for capacity building, ICRA initiates collaboration amongst key partners, helps to raise awareness and stimulates the development of a joint national vision on ways of building capacity for, and institutionalising the use of, new approaches to rural innovation. Up-front capacity building of inter-institutional core teams of representatives of key partners can be arranged through ICRA's

ICRA's role in the North and in linking South and North

In the North, ICRA sees its role as stimulating closer links and collaboration between the numerous, small and often isolated existing cells of expertise in rural innovation systems, especially at the European level. As an existing European platform it can play an active role in the new EC ERA-ARD network programme as the nucleus for an international programme in capacity building in new approaches to knowledge generation for rural innovation and sustainable development. By actively linking cells of interest in the North and South, ICRA can contribute to a balanced and two-way interactive learning programme in simultaneously building capacity in and mainstreaming the use of new rural innovation approach.

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