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# A Brief Guide for Research Engagement with Development Partners

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### Disclaimer

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### Online:

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## Introduction

There is growing demand on agricultural research institutions to deliver development outcomes and impacts that are tractable and measurable within a reasonable time frame. In the conventional view, researchers who are dedicated to investigations aimed at finding solutions to problems are less inclined or poorly equipped to be involved in elaborating how solutions can be delivered to users at large scale. Development outcomes and impacts, nonetheless, represent the only evidence for returns to investment in agricultural research. One school of thought, that attempted to address the problem of slow progress in development outcomes and impacts of agricultural research, particularly in more complex production systems and natural resources context, argue that research is generating technologies that are not suitable for complex situations of smallholder farmers in developing countries, and the solution is to develop technologies as close or in collaboration with users/farmers. This leads to the development of the participatory research movement with different strands: participatory research, participatory research and development, community-based research, integrated research and development, etc. [1, 2, 3]. Although the participatory research movement has increased the interactions between researchers and local communities/farmers, and perhaps yielded better diagnostics, and more context relevant solutions, it has become clear that large scale behavioral changes can only be achieved through “development multipliers”: national development programs, development projects, NGOs, who have much larger outreach than research. Therefore, research needs to find ways to link with development partners. Hence, there is now growing literature on exploring how research can engage with development partners [4, 5, 6].

## Objectives of the Guide

This brief guide aims to present the key features of research engagement with development partners as a guide for researchers who aim to engage with development. The objectives of the guide are two-fold:

- 1) To present the key features of research engagement with development partners as a guide for researchers who aim to engage with development; and
- 2) To provide a questionnaire for self-assessment of how the project engages with development partners as part of the pathway towards impact to be filled after each engagement (Annex A).

## Objectives of engagement

The purpose of research engagement with development partners **is to bring about behavioral change at higher levels (policy and national program/project levels) which consequently will have large scale impact on ultimate beneficiaries - the rural poor.** Development partners often have large programs and projects that have coverage at sub-national, national or regional scale and any changes in technologies,

procedures, practices and policies at that level will have a substantially large impact. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the objective of the development partners to engage with research is important. It is plausible to assume that development partners expect from research new innovations, technologies and capacities that could directly benefit their beneficiaries and, that would enhance the performance of their programs. Accordingly, the objective of the engagement should be seen as a mutual and shared one. A further important objective is to embed research in development and establish a proof of concept on how technologies (this includes biophysical as well as institutions and policies) perform under different agro-ecological and socioeconomic/policy contexts and how they can be rolled out at scale through the development agenda.

## **Who are the development partners that research should engage**

The development partners are those involved in development practice, which may include professional departments, or relevant ministries at the local, district, regional and national levels. Examples include the extension services, forestry departments, etc.; focused national development programs (example national production campaigns), donor supported development projects and NGOs. In addition, it may include land users, different intermediary service providers or market agents involved in the target value chain. These are development multipliers with local knowledge and networks as well as a development mandate with large outreach of rural households. Donor-supported development projects on the same theme, for example sustainable land management, are specific stakeholders which are relevant for this project. A clear engagement process using this guide is important.

## **Challenges of engagement**

There are many challenges facing efforts to engage research and development. One challenge is the attitudes of some researchers who believe that their job ends once their research is published. Although this attitude is rapidly changing due to the pressure to show impact, the more important challenge facing researchers is lack of skills in communication and facilitation essential for the engagement process. It is important that research institutions invest in these skills and deploy social scientists and communication professionals who would support researchers in the engagement process with the development community.

A further challenge is the view that research engagement with development will affect research quality as efforts shift from research to dissemination. However, this is not a strong argument as the whole purpose of the engagement is to strengthen the complementarity between research and development in a manner that translates research findings to development outcomes.

Additionally, getting development partners' full cooperation and finding win-win opportunities that satisfy both sides is a further hurdle to negotiate. There is growing experience of effective collaboration between research and development and the key here is developing common development goals and a clear understanding of the complementarity of the two sides.

## How to engage with win-win outcome

Recent literature has attempted to develop frameworks for linking research to development but without coming up with one single overarching model [7, 8]. Engagement can certainly take different forms and shapes and there is no one single prescription. One approach is of the use of a stakeholder platform (sometimes referred to as *innovation platform*). The way this is practiced still varies widely from highly-structured fora to informal interactions between research and development practitioner and other stakeholders. The assumption here is that members of the platform are interacting and learning together towards the generation, dissemination and continuous adoption of agricultural innovations. This calls for a **systematic process that guides this co-learning and requires effective facilitation**. The interactive and co-learning approach is in contrast with the linear path that moves from research and through technology transfer, diffusion and adoption. In this case innovation refers to the activities and processes associated with the generation, dissemination, adaptation and use of new technical, institutional and organizational knowledge to the benefit of all stakeholders in the partnership. **In other words, innovation is the process through which the outputs of research are facilitated by stakeholders to catalyze the achievement of development impact.**

## Principles of Engagement

Some important principles for effective engagement are outlined below.

**Engagement needs to have some structure with a shared motive** (shared vision and mission); procedures that govern its management including those that allow knowledge sharing; leadership that brings people together and drives the process; and accountability that requires some level of performance evaluation.

Here are thought questions to guide the engagement:

- Who is funding participation in the research-action arena? (What are the formal channels of responsibility and accountability? What are the informal channels?)
- Who is included in processes of engagement? Who is excluded? Why?
- What do these inclusions and exclusions say about the power relations that are in place? (Are efforts being made to share power? Could power relations be changed by changing who is in and who is out?)
- What do these inclusions and exclusions say about the actions that may result from engagement?
- How is it governed? (Is there an oversight structure?)

- How do these governance arrangements shape the research-action agenda?
- Are governance arrangements appropriate for sustainable development? If not, how might they be altered?
- Who is responsible for action toward sustainability?
- Are all those holding responsibility involved in the research-action process?
- What knowledge is being brought to support decisions for action? (Are there any key participants missing?)
- What are the institutional constraints on what can be done (e.g., existing regulations, lack of regulations)?
- Should institutional constraints be challenged? How?
- How is local community involvement managed? How is involvement of women and youth managed and facilitated?
- How is private sector involvement managed?

## **Understanding of roles**

Questions: How do participants in the research-action arena—both researchers and non-researchers—understand the roles research-based knowledge as authoritative solution provider or as a source of useful knowledge or as a voice that can challenge power relations or as a guide to more detailed or disciplined learning?

Do various participants understand the role of research-based knowledge differently?

Should any such differences be resolved, or can they become useful tensions for creativity and innovation? How might this be achieved?

Does the diversity of the multi-stakeholder provide understanding of the complex agricultural and NRM context and how?

## **Integration**

Integration means greater interaction of interested parties, both within science and between researchers and decision makers. This includes linking different disciplines (hydrology, agronomy, social sciences) and creating governance structures whereby landholders, researchers, and government representatives participate in priority setting and decision making within a watershed.

Questions: How is integration designed and implemented? What governance structures allowing different stakeholders (landholders, researchers, and government representatives) to interact, analyze problem and agree on actions? How are perspectives of different Jurisdictions (local, district and national) integrated?

## **Learning:**

Learning is the process of innovation in which all stakeholders learn and gain knowledge by sharing both technical knowledge as well as knowledge related to institutions and policies. Learning creates

innovations that address the problem. An important aspect of learning through research-development engagement is the co-production of knowledge or research outputs. It helps if scientists share the role of generating knowledge or research outputs with practitioners and acknowledge the value of coproducing knowledge. This could make development practitioners more willing to accept research embedded in development.

Questions: What sort of learning has transpired from the engagement? How does that influence the way the project approaches land restoration from the technical point of view/or from the social, institutional and policy view point?

## **Negotiation**

Negotiation is essential where research actively involves society (particularly research users and those affected by the outcomes of research) in the research process. Negotiation between scientists and society becomes the norm, as governments, industry, and citizens demand a greater say in scientific processes, and science is deeply embedded in many—perhaps all—forms of day-to-day decision making.

Question: What kinds of negotiations were involved in engaging development practitioners? What is the power structure in the negotiations and decision making process? What obligations and commitments have the negotiations have yielded?

## **Facilitation**

Experience suggest that for successful research development engagement, there is a need for using rigorous processes, “tried and tested” tools, and world-class expertise in facilitating stakeholder engagement, building teams, and establishing ways to measure and communicate impacts and outcomes [7, 8].

Questions: Who does the facilitation activities at different levels - Community level, Strategic development partners levels? Does the research team use specific facilitation tools to ensure that engagement is effective and generates outputs? If so, what type of facilitation tools are used?

## **Communities of Practice:**

The IFAD-funded project, “Restoration of degraded land for food security and poverty reduction in East Arica and the Sahel: taking successes in land restoration to scale” will facilitate the creation of communities of practice to foster relationships, develop learning situated in practice, create and share new knowledge to restore degraded land, returning it to effective and sustainable tree, crop and livestock production, thereby increasing land profitability and landscape and livelihood resilience. Please refer to the Communities of Practice Guidelines.

## **Performance assessment**

How to assess the performance of the engagement? The value of the engagement should be monitored by annual review of the two parties. This can be done in a meeting of research and development partners to review achievements against expectations also discuss new opportunities and risks associated with engagements. The review is essential for calibrating expectations, milestones and setting new activities.

## **Documentation of the engagement process**

In order to document the engagement of research with development partners, assess it, learn lessons from the experience and improve it, we request that project teams in each country fill the questions in Annex A and return to Leigh Winowiecki not later than June 2017.



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## Annex A. Questions for self-assessment of how the project engages with development partners as part of the pathway towards impact

This brief questionnaire should be filled before end June 2017, and then it will be updated every six months so the project team can measure progress that is being collectively made as well as the learning that is being exhibited.

1. **Who are our Development Partners:** Please list the development partners that you are engaged to achieve development outcomes?

### Partner 1

Name of partner organization:

Why did you choose this partner, and in one sentence describe this partner's role(s) in the envisioned change process:

How will you engage with this partner, and briefly describe the partner's role in the research activity:

List one indicator that can be used to track the engagement/role of this partner.

Expectations from partner: .....

Partner expectations form research-----

If there is a multi-stakeholder of platform; please describe and who is associated with the platform?

### Partner 2

Name of partner organization:

Why did you choose this partner, and in one sentence describe this partner's role(s) in the envisioned change process:

How will you engage with this partner, and briefly describe the partner's role in the research activity:

List one indicator that can be used to track the engagement/role of this partner.

Expectations from partner: .....

Partner expectations form research-----

If there is a multi-stakeholder of platform; please describe and who is associated with the platform?

**Partner 3**

Name of partner organization:

Why did you choose this partner, and in one sentence describe this partner's role(s) in the envisioned change process:

How will you engage with this partner, and briefly describe the partner's role in the research activity:

List one indicator that can be used to track the engagement/role of this partner.

Expectations from partner: -----

Partner expectations form research-----

If there is a multi-stakeholder of platform; please describe and who is associated with the platform?

**2. How do we engage:**

Please describe the process you use to engage development partners?

Have researchers engage practitioners in an iterative process of research to action? If yes please briefly describe.

**3. How is our engagement performing?**

We should make an attempt to measure the performance of our engagement in influencing the partner to take actions that lead to development outcomes supported by research evidence. Here are intermediate indicators we can monitor:

How many times have the partners consulted the research team for direct advice in the last 12 months?

Partner 1 ----- No of requests----; Partner 1 ----- No of requests----; Partner 1 -----, No of requests---
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How often did the research team gathered development partners for considering input in the last 12 months?

Number of partner gathered-----; Number of times gathering were made-----
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How many events did the development partners funded or co-funded (example, joint workshops, training, field visits, etc.) in the last 12 months?

Did the development partners solicit research support for supporting controversial land restoration issues? Briefly explain the situation.

Does the research team make an attempt to influence contested land restoration action agenda? If so, please briefly explain.

Did development partners request researchers to work with them to solve land restoration problem? If yes please briefly explain.

**Behavioral change:**

Are there any indications that development partners have changed their:

- Awareness-----
- Practices-----
- Plans-----
- Programs-----
- Operational procedures-----
- Policies -----

If so please briefly explain which partner and what change and when that occurred?

**Effects at the level of beneficiaries:**

Please indicate any observed uptake of land restoration innovations practices by land users (Once this determines more through cases studies can follow up):

- Location -----
- Name of the land restoration innovation-----
- Estimate number of land users taking up the knowledge-----
- Estimate the total area of land covered by the innovation-----