

Enhancing Partnerships for Enabling Rural Innovation in Africa: Challenges and prospects for institutionalizing Innovation Partnerships

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Abstract

Despite increasing interest and support for multi-stakeholder partnerships, examples of successful partnerships are either uncommon or undocumented. There is also a dearth of simple tools and approaches that enable research and development organisations to benchmark the status of their partnerships, assess their effectiveness and performance, and to reflect on their experiences and lessons in partnerships. This paper applied the After Action Review (AAR) and peer assist, two innovative techniques to facilitate collective reflection and analysis of experiences with partnerships based on the key elements for success and challenges of maintaining and institutionalizing effective partnerships. Results highlight the dynamic process of partnership formation and the key elements that contribute to their success. These include: (i) shared vision and complementarity, (ii) consistent support from senior leadership; (iii) evidence of institutional and individual benefits; (iv) investments in human and social capital; (v) and joint resources mobilization and sharing. However, institutionalizing partnerships requires creative strategies for coping with high staff turnover and over-commitment, conflicting personalities and institutional differences, and transaction costs. The paper suggests that AAR and Peer Assist techniques can be extremely valuable tools when combined with well grounded qualitative analytical methods and rigorous quantitative analyses to strengthen the robustness of the results.

Key words: after-action-review, evaluation, participatory research, partnerships, rural innovation, scaling up, social capital, Africa.

Multi-stakeholder partnerships are widely recognized as a means to improve the efficiency, ownership, and impacts of agricultural research and development in complex and diverse environments. However, there is little documented evidence of the elements of success and challenges of partnerships. This paper draws from experiences with the Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) initiative, a research for development partnership that aims at empowering farmers' groups to improve rural livelihoods. in eastern and southern Africa. The results are based on partners' self assessment and participatory techniques for facilitating reflexivity, a research practice in which stakeholders recognize and explicitly analyse their experiences in the processes and outcomes of their actions. Results highlight the dynamic process of partnership formation and the key elements that contribute to their success. These include: (i) shared vision and complementarity, (ii) consistent support from senior leadership; (iii) evidence of institutional and individual benefits; (iv) investments in human and social capital; (v) and joint resources mobilization and sharing. However, institutionalizing partnerships requires creative strategies for coping with high staff turnover and over-commitment, conflicting personalities and institutional differences, and transaction costs. Sustaining partnerships with the private sector still remains an important challenge. More research is needed on the real costs, benefits, outcomes and sustainability of multi-stakeholder partnerships in agricultural research for development.

Key words: after-action-review, participatory research, partnerships, reflexivity, rural innovation, scaling up, social capital, Africa.

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Introduction

Stakeholder participation and multi-stakeholder partnerships form key cornerstones and strategic approaches of the new paradigms of agricultural research *for* development that aim to improve the relevance, efficiency, equity, ownership, sustainability and impacts of agricultural and natural resources management technologies and innovations (Johnson et al., 2003; Michelsen, 2003; Sayer & Campbell, 2001). Within the participatory research literature, there is a wide recognition for the need of more pluralistic arrangements for conducting research with a greater role for civil society, including farmers and other non research organizations, rather than just acting as conduits of technology (Ashby, 2003; Chambers, 2005). The innovation system theories call for change in the way agricultural research is being conducted (Hall et al., 2001; Sayer & Campbell, 2001) The innovation system theory sees agricultural research as a complex process produced by a network of actors and stakeholders that co-evolve with the technologies and processes they generate (Douthwaite et al., 2004; Hall et al., 2001). A key feature of the innovation system theory is that innovations are often complex systems whereby networks of research, entrepreneurial, and other actors interact to produce and use new knowledge. Central to this theory is the concept of partnerships (Hall et al., 2004) as farmers and rural communities are increasingly faced with complex problems which cross traditional boundaries and mandates of agricultural R&D organizations.

However, despite increasing interest and support for multi-stakeholder partnerships, examples of successful partnerships and sustained collaboration are either uncommon or undocumented (Gillies, 1998; Spielman & Grebmer, 2004). Most partnerships are operating without sufficient information on existing partnerships experiences, lessons and models (Ansari et al., 2001; Halliday et al., 2004). While research on partnerships has been prominent in human-capital-intensive professional services such as public health and education (Ansari et al., 2001; Costello & Zumla, 2000; Das & Teng, 2003; Gillies, 1998), business and management (Selsky and Parker, 2005) and in industrialized countries, scientific efforts to improve the understanding of partnerships are still rare in agricultural research, especially in developing countries. A few studies have focused on private-public partnerships in industrialized countries (Binenbaum et al., 2001; Spielman & Grebmer, 2004) and on experience of stakeholder participation in agricultural research, extension and training (Michelsen, 2003). There is now a recognition that research attention should focus on how partnerships can be managed to achieve collaborative advantage, and to identify the critical factors that contribute to effective partnerships (CGIAR, 2005). This is consistent with some studies that indicate that a high proportion of such partnerships or alliances either fail or have to be restructured or may have been plagued by unsatisfactory cooperation and performance (Das & Teng, 2003).

This paper draws from five years of experience and lessons learned with multi-stakeholder partnerships for Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) in Africa. ERI partnerships are developing and adapting innovative participatory approaches and methodologies for empowering rural communities to (i) identify market opportunities and develop profitable and sustainable enterprises, (ii) generate and access information, knowledge and technology in support of their productive activities, and (iii) strengthen their organisational capacity to better manage their resources increasing their prospects for an upward spiral out of poverty (Sanginga et al., 2004).

The rest of this paper starts with a discussion on definitions, types and scope of partnerships, followed by a description of the methodology and approaches used for evaluating ERI partnerships. Section four outlines the types, process and criteria for forming ERI partnerships. The remainder of the paper highlights the key elements of successful partnerships and strategies

for coping with obstacles to successful partnerships. The concluding section summarises key lessons and their implications for further research on partnerships in agricultural research for development.

2. Definitions, types and stages of partnerships

A major problem with the term partnerships, like many others in current vogue such as development, participation, social capital, innovation (Chambers, 2005; Pretty and Ward, 2001), is that partnership is often used as a generic term that covers a multitude of forms of organizational affiliation and institutional arrangements, lacking a precise definition, theory and framework. The theories of partnerships are diverse and range from resources dependency theory (Alston et al., 1995; Byerlee, 2000; Collinson & Tollens, 1994), organizational and institutional theories (Barret et al., 2005; Eilbert, 2003; Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998) to the innovation system theory (Douthwaite et al., 2003; Hall et al., 2004).

In this paper, we use the term partnerships to describe a collaborative arrangement between independent organizations to plan and implement a jointly agreed programme with joint resources; share relevant information in a manner that generates collaborative advantage and synergies. Eilbert (2003); and Castello & Zumla (2000) highlight some criteria to characterize the extent of collaboration between organizations. These include formalization (social legitimacy gained, official recognition), reciprocity (degree of mutual exchange of resources and decision-making), standardization (rules and regulations) and frequency and intensity of interactions (commitment and enthusiasm). These are different from contractual and consultative arrangements between organizations or individuals where one organization retains resources, responsibilities and powers for decisions and actions, while other parties are only responsible for delivery of services and have only marginal interest or role. Partnerships are also different from networks of personal or professional relationships which do not involve organisational commitment.

Many models and frameworks have been developed to describe partnerships, using different criteria. Some of these models are based on the degree of formalization of partnership, while others consider the cycle and process of partnerships. Lowndes and Skelcher (1998) suggest a partnership model based on a four-stage life-cycle (i) pre-partnership collaboration; (ii) partnership creation; (iii) partnership programme delivery; and (iv) partnership termination. Ansari et al. (2001) defined three stages of partnerships: partnership formation, partnership implementation and delivery and institutionalization of partnerships. During the formation stage, a lead agency brings together participants who develop a common vision, define outcomes and develop action plans and agreements. At the implementation stage, the focus turns to programme and activities as well as to maintenance and routinisation of structures and processes. During the institutionalisation stage, organisations adopt the programme as their own and allocate their own resources to the implementation of activities with little or without external funding.

3. Methodology and approaches for evaluating partnerships

There are several frameworks for evaluating partnerships. Spielman & Grebner (2004) and Eilbert (2003) summarized some of the most common frameworks and methodologies for evaluating success in partnerships. These include performance measurement approach, process analysis, and comparative analysis of different partnership models and their impacts. Asthana & Richardson (2004), Gomley (2001) and Costello & Zumla (2002) proposed partnership assessment tools using structured questionnaires and other formal assessment tools. Gomley's partnership assessment tool contains two basic elements: foundation elements and sustaining

elements. The foundation elements are the elements that need to be addressed during the initial stages of partnership formation, while the sustaining elements are process elements that nourish partnership over time and are vital to the ultimate success and continuation of the partnership. Others have used an audit of perceptions and other qualitative approaches to identify interests, motivations, potential for mutual benefits, changes in behaviour and perceptions of different partners.

Our intention in this paper is not to evaluate the success, outcomes and impacts of ERI partnerships. Our main objective is to take a more participative and qualitative approach to document and reflect on lessons learned and partners' reflections on the key elements that sustain partnerships and key challenges for institutionalization of ERI partnerships. Data for this paper come from experiences with the Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) in Africa partnerships. ERI is a partnership among an international research centre (CIAT), national agricultural research organizations, government extension services, non-governmental organizations and where possible the private sector working together with farmers' organizations to improve livelihoods in selected pilot learning sites. ERI partnerships work toward enhancing the ability of rural communities and local stakeholders to experiment with technologies and social innovations that link production to markets and natural resources management, in a resource-to-consumption system (Sanginga et al., 2004; CIAT, 2005). Figure 1 illustrates the broad principles and steps of ERI. These include identification and selection of partners and pilot sites; participatory community visioning and diagnostics, participatory market opportunity identification, farmer experimentation, participatory monitoring and evaluation, strengthening social capital and community empowerment, and facilitation and provision of technical and market information.

Data for this paper were gathered from partners' self assessment in participatory workshops, and participatory monitoring and evaluation processes of ERI partnerships with farmers' groups. , A total of 70 people representing 13 partners' organizations participated in two participatory workshops. These included 14 senior and middle level managers and 56 field staff and scientists from research and development organizations (Table 1). A total of 81 farmers from six groups participated in community-based participatory monitoring and evaluation processes, in which partnerships was one of the key performance area. Separate interviews were held with three representatives of the private sector partners.

The analysis and assessment of partnerships were based on Michelsen's (2003) framework for characterizing partnerships with the following key questions, (i) what is the purpose and the motivating factors of partnership (why collaborate)? (ii) who is collaborating? (profile of partners institutions); (iii) what is the partnership about (function, scope, ownership, management, governance, formality, themes) ?; (iv) how does the partnership develop over time (partnership lifecycle); and (v) what do institutions and individuals gain from the partnership (partnership outcomes and benefits)? To enhance interactions amongst participants and in order to provide depth in the analysis of partnerships experience, we applied the After Action Review (AAR), a participatory tool that facilitate collective learning by talking, thinking, sharing and capturing the lessons learned with partnerships before they are forgotten (CIDA 2002). Because it is often used in small working groups, AAR has the advantage of creating a climate of confidence as it focuses on constructive feedback, and explicitly recognizes positive contributions, things that are working well and that people are proud to share with others. AAR uses the following six questions: (i) What was supposed to happen? Why? (ii) What actually happened? Why? (iii) What is the difference? Why? (iv) What went well? Why? (v) What could have gone better? Why? and (vi) What lessons can we learn? These questions provided the opportunity to evaluate what works, how and why, but also to induce a process of collective learning and sharing empirical examples and experiences with partnerships, and to examine the critical factors that may have contributed to successes or difficulties in partnerships. An

additional participatory tool, “peer assist” was also used as an aid to analyse challenges of, and obstacles to, effective partnerships and collectively reflect on strategies for coping with these obstacles. Partners with an important challenge were facilitated to present their experience in small working groups of 4-6 people to stimulate constructive discussion and analysis of different strategies for coping with such obstacles. Four “Peer Assist” sessions were organized in each of the two participatory workshops, as a follow up to AAR. Both AAR and Peer Assist proved to be very useful techniques for self-reflection and analysis as they encouraged partners to identify their collective strengths and opportunities, and to take failures or weaknesses and transform them into constructive learning processes.

4. Types and process of building ERI partnerships

ERI partnerships started in 2002 with five partners in two countries (Uganda and Malawi), building on CIAT’s collaborative programmes with national agricultural research organisations in these countries. Partnerships with the national agricultural research organisations were developed as a response to the demands by senior managers of three NARS to CIAT for technical support in areas of rural innovation. However, building partnerships with the NGOs was initially driven by CIAT, based on the need to work with research and development partners, and farmers’ organisations to develop and refine participatory research approaches.

From these initial five partners in 2002, ERI has now expanded its partnerships to reach 23 boundary partners (Table 2), 61% of them being demand driven. These include four national agricultural research institutes; seven non governmental organizations, four government extension services and local government; 3 private business sectors, and 2 international agricultural research centres, working together with over 59 farmers’ organizations in 12 pilot learning sites. These partnerships are at different stages: 43% at the partnership formation stage; 34.8% at the delivery stage, and 21.7% have reached the partnership institutionalization stage, while 13% were terminated. These stages correspond to Pretty & Ward (2001)’s stages of group development based on maturity social capital transformations in groups: reactive dependence; realisation-independence and awareness-independence. The reactive-dependence stage corresponds to the partnership formation stage where organisations come together to achieve a mutual objective as a result of the prompting of an external agency, or in reaction to a trend, crisis or opportunity. The second stage corresponds to the delivery or implementation stage where partnerships see a growing independence combined with realisations of new opportunities and emerging capabilities. At this stage partners are willing to invest time and resources, and tend to develop horizontal linkages with other organisations. The last stage corresponds to the institutionalisation stage where partners are sufficiently strong and resilient, and are capable of institutionalizing and scaling out to other areas and initiating new partnerships.

The number of partners is expanding rapidly with increasing demands from existing and new partners in the initial three countries, but also with new partners in a number of new countries such as Mozambique, Kenya, DR Congo, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe. Partners are increasingly also forming their own partnerships in their efforts to upscale ERI. In each pilot learning site, ERI’s boundary partners include an international agricultural research centre (CIAT), national agricultural research institutes, government extension services, non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, and where possible the private sector.

The selection of partners was guided by a number of criteria including: shared values and principles; opportunities for incorporating ERI into on-going research or development work; potential for mutual learning, potential for success and impacts, and prospects for scaling out and up, guide the selection process. These selection criteria are also anticipated outcomes of partnerships that will evolve with the partnerships.

4. Elements of successful partnerships

Analysis of results of AAR revealed some critical elements that need to interact at the different stages to build and sustain effective partnerships. These include: (i) shared vision, interdependence and complementarity, (ii) strong endorsement and consistent support from senior leadership; (iii) institutional and individual benefits; (iv) investments in human and social capital; (v) resources sharing and joint resources mobilization, and (vi) prospects for scaling up and institutionalization

i) Shared vision, interdependence and complementarity

Analysis of ERI partnerships shows that ERI partnership formation experiences are significantly different from these common shortcomings of the IARCs – NARS partnerships. Partnerships between the international agricultural research centres and the national agricultural research systems are often characterized by poor joint development of projects from beginning, lack of shared ownership, a top-down approach with IARCs dominating and taking more credit in partnerships, lack of common ground in problem solving and implementation Place and Were (2004). On the contrary, ERI has closely followed a number of principles and guideposts or indicators of quality partnerships and collaboration in participatory research (Vernooy & McDougall, 2003:120). For example, the research and development agenda in ERI reflects a coherent common agenda that was set collaboratively to allow space for participation and empowerment of farmers' groups (Box 1)

An important element in forming ERI partnerships was to develop a collective vision shared by partners and translate this vision into intended outcomes and practical deliverable outputs and activities. Effective partnerships do not naturally emerge just because poverty alleviation and food security are appealing goals to all agricultural research and development organizations (Barret et al., 2005). It is the ability to achieve something together that no organization could have produced on its own, and the ability of each organization, through collaboration, to achieve its own objectives better than it could alone that has brought ERI partners together. These outcomes and outputs are regularly refined in annual partners meetings to ensure internalization and alignment of different partners with the collective vision. ERI partners all recognize the importance of empowering rural communities to become agents of their own change, rather than delivering finished technologies or handouts. Research and development organizations adopt partnerships as a response to increasing specialization and complexity or in response to external environment (Barret et al., 2005; Eilber, 2003; Lowndes & Skelcher, 1998). Many organizations search for partners with knowledge, technologies and skills to complement their own, and to gain comparative advantage to achieve its objectives and deliver impacts.

ii) Strong endorsement and consistent support from senior leadership:

Getting ERI partnerships off the ground required drive and determination by some individual “champions” with the necessary leadership to commit their organizations and resources to the partnership. The ERI initiative was born after an exposure visit to CIAT headquarters by the Director Generals of NARS from Malawi, Uganda and Mozambique. Subsequent workshops were organized in their respective countries to define a common strategy, and to initiate ERI partnership. These workshops were critical to build institutional commitment and a broad sense of ownership by partners' organizations. Sustaining institutional commitment and support from leadership required maintaining regular and interactive communication with senior leadership, including joint field visits.

iii). Institutional and individual benefits

A major factor in sustaining ERI partnership was evidence of benefits for institutions, as well as for individual staff members. At the institutional level, important benefits include evidence of farm-level impacts, increased visibility and recognition, expanding partnership opportunities, and leverage of additional resources. Evidence of success with farmer's groups has prompted partners to devote more resources to ERI, and enhance institutional commitment to scale out to other areas. An important aspect of institutional benefits has been credit sharing and recognition of partners' contributions in all public presentations, visits, publications or production of any material, which result from partnerships (GFAR, 2003).

iv) Prospects for scaling up and institutionalisation

There are encouraging signs that many of the ERI partners have initiated the process of institutionalization and scaling up ERI, and expanding to new sites or making ERI an important thrust of their organization. At the same time, demands from new partners and new countries are increasing, offering considerable prospects to scale out ERI and influencing research and development approaches in several countries. However, maintaining quality partnerships during up-scaling process, and reducing tensions between research (scientific rigour) and development (activism) is still a challenge. One of the key strategies involves building bridges to other networks, and forming learning alliances to reach other organizations into new areas.

For example, the Traditional Irrigation and Environmental Management Programme (TIP) in Tanzania, has mainstreamed ERI in its "package". In 2003, TIP and CIAT initiated ERI in three water user groups in Lushoto, and then expanded to 18 new water user groups in district in Arumeru District based on experiences with ERI. Subsequently, TIP won a competitive grant to implement the Agricultural Marketing systems Development Programme (AMSDP) in a pilot district, and was subsequently contracted to serve as lead agency to advise, train and monitor several other NGOs in twenty districts on different aspects of ERI. TIP is now reaching over 620 groups in 2006, and is now using ERI approach in 80% of their groups. *"This gives TIP a unique opportunity to replicate the ERI methodology throughout the country, as AMSDP will gradually expand to cover all the regions. Our success results from the use of the ERI methodology. We therefore look forward to receiving further support and continued collaboration from CIAT in this regard."* (Kawa, Executive Director of TIP, personal communication).

Similarly, Plan Malawi, yet another NGO, commissioned an external evaluation of ERI partnerships. The evaluation findings confirmed benefits to both communities, staff and Plan, and recommended to scale out to more communities, and to institutionalize ERI as an effective approach to improving rural livelihoods. Based on success in pilot sites, the department of extension services in Malawi has expressed interest for scaling up ERI as an innovative extension approach that link farmers to markets and research. In Uganda, the National Agricultural Research Organization (NARO) has embraced various components of ERI as a methodology for conducting adaptive research in its agricultural research and development centers (ARDC). The recruitment of staff at the Bulindi ARDC where ERI is being piloted sought to build effective teams based on farmers' research and agro-enterprise needs.

v). Investments in human and social capital

At the individual level, most participants saw capacity building as one of the more stimulating and rewarding parts of the ER partnerships. Frequent examples of benefits to individual staff members of partners' organizations include increased skills, knowledge, confidence, self-esteem, exposure and career opportunities. Over the years, ERI partnerships have organized a number of training workshops and field mentoring on several aspects of research *for* development and rural innovation systems that place staff at a comparative advantage within their organizations and beyond. A number of individuals have been promoted within their organizations, or given more responsibilities and public recognition within their organizations. Some people have been able

to move to better jobs in other organizations, while others are increasingly recognized as “expert facilitators” offering consultancy services to other organizations. Majority of field staff have had opportunities of traveling outside their countries, participating in professional meetings, making presentations and interacting with a range of professionals. This has increased confidence, exposure, self-esteem and social status, and was often cited as an important benefit for individual growth. Finally, prospects for career development through postgraduate training (PhD and Masters), publications and short term training are also important benefits that individual derive from ERI partnerships.

The presence of energetic, motivated, and highly committed community development facilitators, scientists and development staff with good skills in participatory approaches has been critical in achieving success. This however has involved significant investments in building human capital through regular training and field mentoring. A number of training workshops on different aspects of ERI have been conducted, reaching more than 200 research and development partners over the five years. In addition to mutual learning, these workshops have the advantage of broadening partners’ worldviews through exposure to new approaches, skills and tools, but also to new areas, countries and people. The analysis also revealed that ERI partnerships have resulted into high levels of social capital, personal relationships, friendships and social networks that facilitate communication, exchange of information, cooperation, reciprocity, and trust that enable people and organizations to work together for mutual benefits. In turn, social capital provides benefits for both individuals and organizations (Gillies 1998:115; Pretty, 2003) groups and communities (Pretty and Ward, 2001; Ruud, 2000; Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

vi.) Resources sharing and joint resources mobilization

The availability of financial resources within partners’ organizations had a major influence on the success of partnerships. Although ERI partnerships funds were initially secured from donor agencies to support research for development activities, increasingly and with time majority of partners have contributed more resources than the project budget, both in financial and material terms. Co-financing and joint resources mobilization, helping some partners to raise funds through proposal development has been a successful strategy in reducing financial burden, and has increased partners’ stake and commitment. Joint budgeting and planning increased transparency in resources allocation. An important aspect of ERI partnerships is the concept of “community research and enterprise funds” combining internal lending and savings and grants that farmers’ organizations can access and manage to support their own initiatives. This will ensure sustainability beyond project life.

5. Coping with challenges of multi-stakeholder partnerships

Four Peer Assist sessions were conducted to discuss challenges with ERI partnerships. These sessions revealed some critical challenges that have been encountered in the ERI partnership journey and which slow down the institutionalization of ERI. These include: (i) high staff turnover, (ii) conflicting personalities, institutional and cultural differences, (iii) lack of systematic scaling up strategy, (iv) high transaction costs; and (v) challenges of public-private partnerships. The peer assist sessions also suggested strategies or actions to deal with such challenges.

i) High Staff turnover.

One of the critical challenges in ERI partnerships has been high rate of turnover of field staff, particularly competent social scientists. Retaining social scientists and staff with entrepreneur skills in NARS, government services, and local NGOs has always been challenging. Over the five year period, about 23 trained staff in ERI approaches have either left their organizations or changed responsibilities. All the partners, including CIAT have lost at least one of the key staff involved in ERI activities, with some losing up to four in one year. While it was clear that this

high rate of staff turnover has considerable negative effects on the implementation of the project, it was also argued that this may be an indicator of success of the approach and may give prospects for scaling out to other institutions. However, the extent to which ERI principles and concepts are penetrating in the new organizations is not documented. A related problem is over-commitment of field staff who are often assigned several responsibilities and a wider coverage area. It was not also clear to what extent trained staff have influenced others in their organisations and built their capacity in ERI approaches.

ERI's strategy to deal with staff turnover and over-commitment has been to train a core team involving agronomist and extension personnel in any partner organization to create a critical mass of people with the necessary skills in relevant ERI areas. Such teams serve as a pool of resource persons to train staff members, and facilitate collaboration and networking amongst partners. A long-term strategy is needed to institutionalize "agricultural innovation systems" in university curricula and to develop materials for training, field manuals and guides aimed at creating in-country capacity for training which guarantees scaling up and sustainability (GFAR, 2003).

ii) Issues of personalities, institutional and cultural differences

Although in many cases the success of partnership has been sustained by individual relationships and high levels of social capital (trust, networking, cooperation and exchange), there have also been several cases where differences of individual personalities, behaviours, attitudes, and internal conflicts within organizations have had negative effects on ERI partnerships. Differences among partners' organizations and their institutional cultures were initially reinforced by perceptions of the divide and imbalance between research and development, between government services and NGOs; between international and national staff. The fact that ERI has a number of senior scientists from the region has been instrumental to maintaining relationships, minimizing cultural differences, and building social capital.

iii) Coping with high expectations

In some cases, the quest for additional resources as a major motivation for partnerships. With the shrinking resources for agricultural research, the need to engage with new stakeholders and building partnerships has become critical for obtaining funding both in response to donor requirements and as a productive way of achieving more efficient use of scarce resources. This lends credence to Leach & Pelkey (2000)'s analysis of partnership literature that found that the necessity of adequate funding was the most frequently recurring theme in 62% of the studies.

In some cases, ERI partnership was initially seen as a donor-project relationships, or relations of subordination rather than true partnerships. In such cases, access to financial and material resources was the key motivation for partnering, and the instigating partner was seen to be dominant. Organizations that entered into partnership because of financial resources put too much dependence on other partners, and tended to create unrealistic expectations (Gormley, 2001). In some two cases, high individual expectations led to partnership termination, at the formation stage and in one case at the implementation stage. In other case, change of leadership led to partnership termination at a time when the partnership was moving to the institutionalization stage. This occurred despite the existence of formal agreements and highlight the need for innovative strategies to institutionalize partnerships beyond individuals so that partnerships can be sustained when eventually individuals leave, or personal relationships are affected.

iv) Transaction costs

The issue of transaction cost was a recurrent theme on the challenges of sustaining multi-stakeholder partnerships. Working with multiple partners was perceived as expensive as partnerships require more time, meetings and considerable efforts to make partnership arrangements work satisfactorily. This perception was particularly relevant for ERI partnerships

working in different countries and areas, with different organizations with different institutional arrangements and cultures, were therefore expected to be considerable. Such costs include high air and ground travel and communication costs, institutional overheads, as well as transaction and opportunity costs of meetings and workshops, particularly senior and middle managers that reduce available resources for operations and project implementation.

Unfortunately, while financial information of operations and project implementation was readily available, there was no information about the real transaction and opportunity costs of the partnerships as such costs are not recorded. Although it was clear that most partners incur these transaction and opportunity costs, this has not affected partners' willingness and ability to collaborate. Documenting the real costs and benefits of partnerships is still an important gap that needs rigorous research to assess whether the tangible and non-tangible benefits of partnerships outweigh their costs. This is also a critical question for participator research approaches (Johnson et al., 2003).

v) Challenges of public-private partnerships

While considerable efforts have been geared towards forging effective partnerships with the private business sector in Uganda and Malawi; attempts to establish partnerships with the private business sector have been hampered by poor production conditions for small scale farmers who are unable to meet the quality and quantity requirements of the private sector. The biggest challenge lies on maintaining the interest of the private business sector in marginal small-scale farming, which does not always provide high and quick returns to investments, and improving the competitiveness of small scale farming in marginal environments. Spielman & Grebner (2005) analysis of public-private partnerships in agricultural research suggests that some of the challenges relate to differing incentives, cultures and interests. The private sector can engage in research that will produce short-term results and products that appeal to paying consumers, while R&D organizations are mainly concerned with research that address the needs of poor small scale farmers with poor market access. Most private sector companies will prefer contracting mode of partnership than true partnerships. For the private sector, multi-stakeholder partnerships also involve enormous transaction and opportunity costs for attending meetings, field visits, workshops. Learning how to build successful relations between small farmers and the private sector is still a key challenge in ERI partnerships. Such partnerships with the private sector need to go beyond contracting or buyer-seller relationships to include co-financing, provision of extension services and field visits.

6. Conclusion and implications for research

Partnership has become a recurrent theme in agricultural research and development policy, practice and rhetoric. There is now a recognition that research attention should focus on how partnerships can be managed to achieve collaborative advantage, and to identify the critical factors that contribute to effective partnerships (CGIAR, 2005). The analysis in this paper is based on partners' self assessment and participatory evaluation of their experience with the Enabling Rural Innovation partnerships. Such analysis is useful to document lessons and challenges for building and sustaining effective partnerships. The paper is based on reflective practice by partners. Reflexivity refers to research practice in which stakeholders recognize and explicitly analyse their own roles and actions, experiences in the processes and outcomes of partnerships. It is argued that those projects in which partners reflect directly and explicitly on their own role in the partnerships, are likely to be more successful. The study was based on two participatory techniques (After-Action-Review and Peer Assist) that focus on constructive feedback, and provide partners with the opportunity to evaluate what works, how and why, but also to induce a process of collective learning and sharing empirical examples, experiences and challenges with partnerships.

The results of this assessment are consistent with and complement recent findings on watershed partnerships (Leach & Pelkey, 2001) that the most recurring themes are the necessity of adequate funding, effective management and leadership, interpersonal trust and committed participants. The paper shows that building and sustaining multi-stakeholder is a dynamic process, and reinforces Barret al. (2005)'s observation that scholars and practitioners need to guard against wishful thinking that partnerships and synergies emerge naturally just because organizations have a common goal with common drivers. To be effective, innovation partnerships need considerable investments in time and resources in the formation stage for building a shared vision and a common agenda to ensure institutional commitments. This also helps to enlist support of senior leadership and consistent engagement with committed field staff. It is important to build necessary amount of human capital and social capital to create alignment with the partnerships principles.

ERI partnerships are still grappling with problems that are embedded in the partnership delivery and institutionalization stages. Many of these challenges require creative strategies for coping with over commitment and turnover of trained personnel, dealing with different and some time conflicting personalities, institutional and organizational cultures; dealing with perceptions and unspoken expectations; and potentially high transaction and opportunity costs necessary to make multi-stakeholder partnerships work. Developing and sustaining effective partnerships with the private sector is still an important challenge in marginal, resource poor small scale farming conditions. The lack of a systematic and robust scaling up and exit strategies was an important challenge that many participatory research projects and agricultural innovation systems projects are grappling with.

One important consideration in assessing and sustaining partnership is the issue of transaction costs. It is generally considered that partnerships inherently result in high transaction costs, and are inherently time and resources consuming (Huxham, 1996). Unfortunately, as reflected in this paper, many partners do not have records and data on the real costs (operation, transaction and opportunity costs) incurred with multi-stakeholder-partnerships. On the other hand, majority of partners expect that the tangible and non tangible benefits may offset the initial high costs, which gradually decrease as partners build trust and continue to work together. However, there is no empirical evidence on the real costs of different types and stages of partnerships compared to their benefits, which are often non-tangible and therefore difficult to measure.

Castello & Zumla (2001) cautions that current practices of partnerships in research for development may emphasize the outputs and products (technology impacts, adoption, income) and ignore process outcomes such as ownership, sustainability and development of national and local research capacity. This makes it more difficult to make an evidence-based assessment. In their measurement of the impacts of participatory research, Johnson et al. (2003) suggest that more than technology outputs, the key benefits of participatory research relate to building of social and human capital. The key measure of success for many partnerships is the extent to which they bring about changes in partners' behaviours, policies, attitudes and practices. These are mainly process outcomes: getting research, development, extension and government departments to work together; strengthening farmers' organizations; creating local ownership, and building human and social capital.

Finally, we concur with Gormley (2001) that there is still much to learn from engaging on the partnership journey. This study is of exploratory nature. There are still however, a number of unanswered questions where more rigourous interdisciplinary research is needed to provide important insights into critical elements costs, outcomes and impacts of multi-stakeholder partnerships.

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Table 1: Types of partners and number of participants in partnerships reflection workshops

	Number of boundary partners	Number and categories of participants		
		Managers	Staff	Total
National Agricultural Research Institutes (NARIs)	3	5	14	19
NGOs	4	4	22	26
Government Extension Services	3	2	10	12
International Agricultural Research Centres (ARCs)	2	2	8	10
Private sector	1	1	2	3
Number of farmers' organisations	6	12	69	81
Total	19	26	125	151

Box 1: Principle of quality partnerships in participatory research.

Box 1: The research and development reflects a clear and coherent common agenda.

1. The research (and development) agenda has been set collaboratively and transparently.
2. The research design allows space for the meaningful participation of local stakeholders, including marginalized groups, and takes into account potentially differentiated perspectives and interests.
3. Partnerships among stakeholders have been created and strengthened through dialogue, joint action and mutual benefits (friendships and fun included).
4. The research initiative respects the commitments made with partners, and the follow through strategy is defined.
5. The research includes a clear strategy for action/change, which has been defined in terms of expected outcomes and increased social capital, or more broadly empowerment.
6. There is a good documentation of the participatory process, include the use of tools.
7. The analysis of results and authorship of published materials have been shared between research and other stakeholders.

Source: Adapted from Vernooy & McDougall (2003).

Table 2: Stages of partnerships in ERI and number of “push and pull” partners at each stage in 2006.

Stages of Partnerships	Key milestones and activities	Number of “Push” partners	Number of “Pull” partners	Total
Partnerships Formation stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field visits or presentation • Institutional assessment (criteria for selecting partners) • Partnership start up meetings with senior managers • Needs assessment workshops • Joint proposal development 	2 (8.7%)	8 (34.4%)	10 (43%)
Partnerships delivery and implementation stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training workshops on methodology and concepts • Development of joint action plans, workplans and budget • Negotiation of Memorandum of understanding • Find motivating ways to share information, and to communicate successes • Building social capital (teamwork, mutual accountability, credit sharing, trust and communication) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Dealing with communication challenges ▪ Some partners drop out ▪ Staff turnover and over commitment 	4 (17.4%)	4 (17.4%)	8 (34.8%)
Partnerships institutionalization stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Train a critical mass of staff in partner’s organization • Openly discuss potential barriers to partnership, and establish norms of working together. • Joint resources mobilization • Hold review and planning meetings at regular intervals, • Find motivating ways to share information, and to communicate successes, keep managers informed • Develop a strategy for joint resource mobilization, co-financing and sustainable funding mechanism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Develop plans for scaling up ▪ Shared leaderships, and emergence of small ▪ New partnerships emerge 	3 (13.0%)	2 (8.7%)	5 (21.7%)
Total number of partners in March 2006		9 (39%)	14 (61%)	23 (100)