



Innovative partnerships for successful agroecology initiatives

Introduction

The agroecological transition requires the combined actions of a wide range of stakeholders operating at different levels. These include public and private bodies involved in research, training, agricultural extension, processing and/or marketing of agricultural inputs and products, producer organisations, local authorities, NGOs, etc.

These stakeholders carry out their functions through actions that they often undertake alone or sometimes in formal or informal collaboration with other stakeholders. But the complexity and demands of agroecology are raising awareness among stakeholders of the need to seek complementarity and synergy in their actions around common issues. Partnership projects seem to have the advantage of bringing together stakeholders from various institutions, with complementary functions and expertise. Effective partnerships are essential for making better use of resources, facilitating the co-construction of innovations, sharing knowledge and promoting agroecology on a large scale. Efforts have been made in recent years under various programmes such as the Agroecology Programme (AEP) in West Africa to encourage and develop partnership

initiatives for agroecology. These experiences deserve to be capitalised and enhanced to produce greater impact.

This note is one of seven (7) thematic ones resulting from the capitalisation of the AEP. It aims at documenting innovative partnerships for successful agroecology initiatives. The analysis is based on a review of various works on experiences throughout the ECOWAS region, general interviews with key stakeholders in agroecology at regional level, case studies in six countries (Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo) and the conclusions of a regional workshop to discuss the provisional results.

Summary of experiences

Description of partnerships

TYPES, ORIGINS AND OBJECTIVES OF PARTNERSHIPS

The AEP supported a variety of types of partnership that involve local, national, regional and international stakeholders in promoting innovative agroecological practices. These partnerships are established with NGOs, research institutions including universities, government agencies and producers' organisations, with the aim of building producers' capacity and improving the sustainability of farming systems. The partnerships supported by the AEP also encompass multiple dimensions, touching on finance, production, processing, technological innovation and risk management, and involving a wide range of stakeholders. Key partnerships include those with village savings and credit associations, which facilitate access to financial services for small-scale producers, as well as those between banking institutions and producer organisations. The AEP also supports partnerships with insurance companies, enabling the development of products such as drought insurance. Other partnerships involve collaboration between universities, research centres and producers' groups, encouraging the joint development of experimentation and training facilities. Animal health structures are also integrated into these partnerships to ensure a holistic approach to agricultural activities. Finally, these partnerships include collaboration to promote participatory certification systems such as the participatory guarantee systems (PGS).

Partnerships are established at various levels:

- **partnership for the implementation of regional programmes:** the management of programmes with different components and affecting different sectors (research, extension, training, market, credit, etc.) on the scale of the 15 ECOWAS member countries requires a specific institutional arrangement, the form of which may vary from one programme to another. The management of the AEP involves the political and decision-making authority (DADR), a multi-institutional steering committee and technical monitoring committee, a consortium responsible for implementing the project (AVSF, INADES Formation and IRAM), a programme coordination unit (PCU) responsible for operational management and the Regional Agency for Agriculture and Food (RAAF);
- **partnerships between regional programmes and national stakeholders:** the AEP has led to the identification of national correspondents within the ministries respon-

sible for agriculture to act as agroecology focal points. These national correspondents anchor the programme at national institutional level, helping to organise capacity-building activities for stakeholders, coordinate the activities of the various stakeholders by leading national consultation frameworks for agroecology stakeholders, supervise field projects and mobilise public funding to scale up the achievements of the AEP;

- **partnerships between regional programmes and regional consortia:** in this area, the AEP has helped to set up a consortium of nine (9) West African universities in Benin, Senegal, Burkina Faso and Nigeria to run a MOOC in agroecology. This type of partnership involves projects that require a high degree of pooling of human, material, logistical and financial resources;
- **partnerships between national stakeholders:** the innovation and scaling-up of good agroecological practices require joint action between researchers, extension agents, input providers and producers, and in some cases many others.

INITIATING, SETTING UP AND MAINTAINING PARTNERSHIPS: THE BENEFITS OF EXTERNAL SUPPORT

Partnerships in the field enable (i) producers to benefit from support in implementing agroecological practices that meet their needs, improving crop yields in the face of climatic challenges and securing trade relations; (ii) research centres to experiment, transfer practices resulting from their experiments in support of the agroecological transition, or support producers in their own experiments, and (iii) private structures to develop business activities and improve their financial viability. Following an in-depth analysis of the needs identified, the stakeholders agreed on a work plan.

In some cases, pre-existing partnerships are identified and strengthened while in others, partnerships are rather aroused because of the need to act despite the absence of convincing grassroots initiatives. However, this type of partnership is showing signs of fragility in terms of effectiveness and sustainability. Partnerships are formed following calls for applications, calls for projects or direct contracts with identified partners. The consortium responsible for implementing the AEP and the one responsible for running the MOOC in agroecology were selected or set up based on calls for tender. In theory, calls for tender have the advantage of complying with conventional procurement procedures, but they often take a long time to complete, whereas the programme itself has a limited duration. The length of the procedures can sometimes delay the start of activities, as is the case with

the MOOC programme, which started practically at the end of the programme. Direct contracting is quicker but appears to be an approach based on favouritism.

The AEP funding has been used to cover the costs of research and development of agricultural technologies, to support awareness-raising and training activities for producers and, where a partnership and activities to support agroecology already existed, to broaden the impact of the partnership by involving more beneficiaries.

DEFINING SHARED OBJECTIVES AND SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS

Each stakeholder plays a specific role in the partnerships. Producers are expected to be at the heart of the process, actively participating in the experimentation and evaluation of practices on their own plots. They feedback information on the challenges they face, so that the necessary adjustments can be made. They also contribute to the upkeep of agroecological infrastructure, such as hedgerows and hedged farmland. The NGOs are responsible for coordination, training and technical support.

Trust and transparency are sometimes cited as values underpinning partnerships. However, most partnerships are based on shared objectives formulated around the promotion of agroecological practices. In few cases, however, misunderstandings have arisen in the definition of priorities and the specific interests of stakeholders. As a result, some stakeholders are less involved in the implementation of the project and some activities were slowed down at the start.

Formalising partnerships

AGREEMENTS BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS

In most consortia, an agreement or memorandum of understanding (MoU) has been drawn up, in which the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder are clearly defined. These agreements set out the mutual commitments, specifying the contributions of each party. The agreements therefore attempt to lay the foundations for a lasting partnership with a view to achieving common goals in the development of agroecology. But, despite these agreements, ongoing awareness-raising has been necessary in some countries to ensure that all members, including field stakeholders, truly understand their respective roles. In some cases, the agreement bound only two of the stakeholders, with the third showing little interest in the project.

CONFLICTS AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION MECHANISMS WITHIN CONSORTIA

The agreements between the stakeholders include provisions to avoid conflicts. Partnership agreements state that in the event of conflict, the parties will try to resolve it amicably. Stakeholders stress the importance of internal dialogue and mediation in conflict resolution, favouring solutions based on consensus. In most consortia, no conflicts were reported. In some cases, however, differences of opinion have been reported, particularly during crises such as pest attacks, in which the stakeholders, faced with the emergency, do not always agree on the pest management methods to be favoured, with some advocating the occasional use of chemical products and others opting for agroecological control measures. Other conflicts arise over the management of funds to carry out activities, with the lead partner unwilling to release funds to the other stakeholders as required. These situations put the MoU to the test, but also provide opportunities for dialogue and renegotiation or clarification of objectives with a view to agreeing on suitable solutions that reconcile the imperatives of productivity and the principles of sustainability.

Governance, communication and decision-making in partnerships

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS AND LEVEL OF STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION

Partners are generally involved in the planning and implementation of activities. Decision-making processes are either consultative or collaborative. Organised by the consortia leaders, they are sometimes described as hierarchical and sometimes as equitable, depending on the case. The presence of state structures in the consortia seems to generate an asymmetry of power in favour of the latter, as well as lengthening administrative delays and slowing down decision-making processes. In some cases, the involvement of partners in key decisions varies according to the specific expertise of each institution. For example, training centres may have greater influence over the choice of content for the training modules to be taught. However, efforts are being made to include producers' organisations in discussions about implementation in the field, to adapt technologies to local needs.

FORMAL AND INFORMAL CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN PARTNERS

Partnerships are kept active through various collaborative mechanisms such as regular exchanges between project partners. Formal and informal channels are used according to communication needs. Formal channels include physical and virtual meetings, emails, formal letters, press releases and reports. Follow-up face-to-face meetings are organised monthly. In some cases, however, they are not organised at a fixed frequency but according to the needs of the project. In all cases, the purpose of these physical or virtual meetings is to monitor the progress of activities, make decisions and adjust certain guidelines if necessary. At the same time, informal channels such as WhatsApp groups and telephone calls are increasingly used for rapid and direct communication, making it possible to adapt to different contexts, the degree of emergency and the nature of the information to be shared.

Allocation of resources, technical support and capacity building

DISTRIBUTION OF RESOURCES BETWEEN PARTNERS

The allocation of the AEP resources was decided at the start of each project according to each person's role. The fact that resources are distributed on a clear basis from the outset of the project avoids the emergence of conflicts and facilitates the achievement of common objectives. The challenges noted in the allocation of resources stem from the mismatch between the allocated budget and the planned activities. Sometimes the lead partner does not agree to release resources as required for the benefit of other consortium members. To reduce the impact of insufficient resources on the effectiveness of the partnership, the stakeholders have sometimes had to resort to additional funding. Furthermore, these resources were often released late, which hampered the progress of activities.

TYPES OF CAPACITY BUILDING OR SUPPORT PROVIDED TO STAKEHOLDERS

The main capacity-building provided to stakeholders by the AEP has focused on administrative and financial management, monitoring and evaluation for consortia leaders and exchange visits. AEP support also included mid-term monitoring missions and problem-solving support missions. These various forms of support have enabled project managers to better monitor the progress made in implementing activities. The skills acquired have not only enabled the project to be managed more effectively but are also being put to good use in the management of other projects. Consortia members would like to receive additional support to improve their ability to work together. The improvement of skills in negotiation, partnership management and networking is fundamental for the partners.

Lessons learnt and conclusions

Benefits and challenges

The partnership has had several positive effects, not only for producers and other economic stakeholders such as traders, but also for the consortia member organisations. The main effects are improved capacity and yields for producers, and spin-offs for the partner institutions, which are gaining in expertise, credibility, visibility and reputation. For the members of the consortia, in addition to strengthening the capacities of technicians, the partnership has made it possible to create complementarity of interventions, to extend their circle of intervention to new groups of producers, and to increase the visibility, credibility and reputation of the partner structures. This symbolic capital could lead to greater support from technical and financial partners in the future.

Partnerships with the RAAF and the ministries responsible for agriculture have led to the establishment of national correspondents (NCs) to act as agroecology focal points. Their achievements vary from one country to another and depend largely on the dynamism of the NCs. Some have succeeded in mobilising national resources to supplement RAAF funding. Thanks to this initiative, national consultation frameworks have been set up in many countries (see Thematic Note 5).

Negative effects have also been noted in some cases. The process of selecting stakeholders, such as national correspondents, can lead to frustration and even internal conflict within organisations. Inappropriate management of partnerships, for example through insufficient involvement of one stakeholder, unbalanced power relations or administrative red tape, can lead to a deterioration in the relationship of trust between stakeholders.

Conditions for implementation and success

The challenges encountered in implementing partnerships are cultural, organisational and financial. For a partnership to work, there are some conditions for implementation and success.

Building relationships of trust sometimes took some time in several consortia, especially those whose members had never jointly implemented a project. The existence of a written contract formalising the collaboration by describing the roles,

responsibilities and resources allocated to each stakeholder was important in establishing relationships of trust.

A strong interest in agroecology on the part of producers is necessary to obtain their commitment. However, in some projects, a reluctance was noted among some producers to implement agroecological practices. The positive testimonies of some producers, who have seen a marked improvement in their yields, have also played a decisive part in persuading other producers to adopt these new practices.

Differences in organisational cultures were also expressed between public and private stakeholders, with the latter deploring the administrative constraints of the former, which make the implementation of activities more complex and less flexible. Similarly, differences in understanding of agroecology were reported in some consortia, indicating the need to clarify the concept of agroecology.

Insufficient financial resources and delays in making them available have made it difficult to implement effectively certain activities in all types of consortium/partnership. Regarding the delays, it should be noted that funding for activities in the field is the result of the partnership between the AFD/European Union and the RAAF/ECOWAS. The RAAF receives funds from the AFD/EU in accordance with the latter's terms and conditions. It transfers part of these funds to a number of structures in the countries (ministries, consortia, leaders), also in accordance with its terms and conditions. The reporting chain follows the opposite path. In such a system, a failure in one link has a negative impact on all the components. These delays have affected the schedule of activities. Fortunately, in some cases, an amendment to the project made it possible to extend the duration and adjust the deadlines, thus providing a respite to complete the remaining activities.

Although efforts seem to have been made in some partnerships to include young people and women, their integration remains generally limited. The participation of young people in certain training courses has been a real opportunity to enhance their skills. Through this learning process, they have acquired practical knowledge of organic soil fertilisation. This has positioned some of them as leaders in sustainable farming practices within their communities. Where efforts are made, the results seem to be commensurate.



› Members of the CTOP-ITRA-ICAT partnership on a demonstration plot in Togo.

Sustainability conditions

Experience of partnerships in different countries shows that an institutional and community base is necessary to guarantee the sustainability of actions to promote agroecology. Shared governance means building the capacity of local and national institutions to encourage cooperation between the various stakeholders.

The existence of a viable economic model for the sector is essential to motivate private players to enter participatory research and advisory support partnerships. This can be achieved through the development of a range of agroecology training and advisory services that are useful to producers and enable the establishment of mutually beneficial business relationships.

The availability of adequate internal and external funding over the long term is an important factor in sustainability. While internal funding is necessary for continuity, external funding is important to launch the initial phases of experimentation and capacity building. Subsidies are useful for structuring investments, such as infrastructure. They must be governed by clear rules to avoid financial mismanagement.

Scaling conditions

Scaling up partnerships requires key factors to be considered, such as consultation and dialogue between stakeholders, appropriate technical support and capacity building for producers.

For a partnership to be initiated, there must be an underlying problem whose resolution can be beneficial to all stakeholders. Targeting partnerships that are not opportunistic, but rather bring together stakeholders who are already working together around common objectives, facilitates cooperative relationships between stakeholders. Similarly, the existence of an opportunity to establish or strengthen business relationships can contribute to the success of scaling-up, especially with consortia that include private stakeholders.

The experiences reported from various countries highlight the need to take account of the duration and inclusiveness of actions to promote agroecology when scaling up partnerships. These actions must include consultations between all the stakeholders, going beyond the traditional vertical hierarchy seen in many projects, to favour a horizontal, more collaborative approach.

Public policy recommendations

Based on the experience of partnerships in various countries, the following recommendations can be made concerning the incentive measures, frameworks and support systems that can be implemented by national, local and regional authorities, particularly to encourage the sustainability and scaling-up of agroecology partnerships.

 **PROMOTE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF PARTNERSHIPS BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS AND ORGANISATIONS**, by strengthening the collaborative capacities of the different types of stakeholders (public stakeholders, producers' organisations, etc.). Government institutions (ministries of agriculture, research institutes, etc.) can play a fundamental role in the development of agroecology by drawing up National Agroecology Development Strategies and multi-stakeholder consultation frameworks.

 **ENCOURAGE THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MECHANISMS FOR THE SOLID SUPPORT OF AGROECOLOGY** by rural communities and producers' organisations, with a view to ensuring the establishment of relationships of trust between all the local stakeholders involved in various partnerships, the ongoing sharing of knowledge even in the absence of external intervention, and therefore the sustainability of agroecological initiatives.

 **PUT IN PLACE A LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK FAVOURABLE TO PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF AGROECOLOGY**, as well as subsidies, tax exemptions and preferential loans for these partnerships.

 **ALLOCATE PART OF THE AGROECOLOGY BUDGET TO SETTING UP STRUCTURING PARTNERSHIPS.**

 **CLARIFY IN DETAIL THE QUESTION OF THE INSTITUTIONAL SET-UP AND THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS** at various levels as early as the feasibility study. Once the system has been set up, it will be necessary to provide managerial capacity-building for the key players involved.

 **ENSURE THAT PARTNERSHIPS SUPPORTED BY THE PUBLIC AUTHORITIES RECOGNISE THE CENTRAL ROLE OF PRODUCERS' ORGANISATIONS** in steering the research and advisory support systems set up under these partnerships, which must be at the service of producers.



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