

# Perspectives on partnerships:

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## Lessons and implications for international agricultural development\*

### Introduction

Working in partnership has become widespread – and perhaps essential – for effective knowledge generation, agricultural development, and sustainable poverty reduction. However, partnering is frequently time-consuming, frustrating, and less productive than expected. To improve the effectiveness of partnerships in research for development, researchers from the International Potato Center (CIP) reviewed publications, evaluations and reports dealing with partnerships, consortia, alliances, and similar multi-organizational relations. The review reflects not only materials dealing with international agricultural research but also works from other relevant fields such as organizational development, health, public service delivery, institutional economics, and science and technology policy studies.

This brief highlights key findings from a review of the partnership literature and presents common challenges, themes, lessons, and implications for international research for development organizations.

### Challenges

**The literature on partnerships is rich but fragmented.** There has been a great deal of useful work on the topic of partnering, but very little cross-fertilization. The relevant "nuggets" of wisdom are often buried deeply within specialist literature that is virtually unknown by and inaccessible to most of those working in international agricultural research for development.

**Different fields of study and practice emphasize different aspects of partnering.** Management specialists tend to emphasize strategic uses of partnering. Science policy analysts emphasize the role of partnerships in innovation. Economists emphasize issues of market failure and intellectual property rights. The distinct fields generally work in isolation, with little cross-communication. The result is a dearth of knowledge that could be tapped by managers and policy makers in the field of agriculture, who are eager to obtain practical guidelines for action.

**The term "partnership" is loosely defined, inconsistently applied, and rapidly evolving – leading to potential confusion and misunderstanding.** Partnering applies to relationships that range from very informal collaborations to highly defined relationships that involve a full sharing of risks, rewards, resources, and responsibilities. The meaning also changes across disciplines. For example, in the business community,

a partnership means an entity in which partners share in the profits or losses of the business. In the international community a partnership may be more of an alliance rather than a formal business partnership. The use of the term also has expanded in the international community to include arrangements that previously would have been called consortia, networks, or country and regional programs.

### Cross-cutting themes

Key themes cross cut the diversity of studies and reports reviewed, offering useful guidance for policymakers, managers, and researchers. They also provide a potential springboard for future applied research.

#### Essential features

Numerous features have been identified as essential for a multi-organizational relationship to be considered a partnership. The first is the pursuit of common objectives related to the generation of knowledge and innovation rather than simply to promote greater efficiencies. Equally important is the development of mutual trust, which often requires considerable time and investment. A third commonly noted feature is the generation of benefits that are shared by all participants.

#### A continuum from less to more formal arrangements

Inter-organizational partnerships tend to be



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dynamic. They shift with time, often evolving from less to more formal arrangements as common purposes and interdependencies increase. Ultimately, a partnership may take on a life of its own as a spin-off entity that develops into new “proto-institution.” Thus, it ceases to be a partnership and becomes a new full-fledged organization.

However, formality has its costs. As partnerships become more formalized, they may also face the risk of losing the flexibility and fluidity that can be conducive to greater knowledge creation and innovation. Moreover, not all partnerships take the route of greater formalization, particularly those designed to meet specific and stable needs.

### Positive and negative drivers

Partnerships are driven by different external, organizational, or individual factors, which may significantly influence the partnering process and its results. More successful drivers may include the desire to achieve goals that cannot be achieved alone, the need to link research to action, or a desire to create new knowledge or policy changes. Negative drivers that lead to collaborative inertia may include slow progress, transactions costs (real or perceived), the view that gains come with too much pain, a sense of lacking adequate knowledge to affect change, or having the relationship imposed by a donor as a precondition for funding.

### Achieving balance, equity, and transparency

Asymmetry in power relations, lack of equity regarding benefits or gains from the partnership, and lack of transparency in the handling of information or resources can seriously undermine trust and success in a partnership. These issues are particularly problematic in North-South partnerships and may pervade various types of partnerships if they are systematically ignored or submerged in political or social support discourses. It is also clear from the literature that effective leadership within a partnership is associated more with providing motivation, and influencing and facilitating processes, rather than with controlling decision-making.

### A new definition

The following definition, based on this literature review, can be proposed for use in the international research-for-development context:

*A partnership is a sustained, multi-organizational relationship with mutually agreed objectives and an exchange or sharing of resources or knowledge for the purpose of generating research outputs (new knowledge or technology) or fostering innovation (use of new ideas or technology) for practical ends.*

### Success factors

The following factors are associated with successful partnerships:

- A common vision and purpose
- Realistically defined goals
- Legitimacy and support for the partnership by parent organizations
- Equitable sharing of resources, responsibilities, and benefits
- Transparent governance and decision-making
- The continual creation of trust
- Learning and capacity development

### Closing notes

Partnership appears to be the latest “bandwagon” in international agricultural research for development. However, it is important to caution that the partnership itself is not an end but rather a means, and the measure of its success should be its outcomes and impacts. Moreover, while it is widely assumed that partnering is an appropriate and effective way to address complex and sustainable development goals, there is little systematic evidence to support this claim. Promising evaluation approaches exist, but further research is needed to test and apply them and to develop better informed theories of partnership that can inform the partnerships and endeavors of the agricultural research for development community.

### \*REFERENCE PUBLICATION:

Horton D, Prain G, Thiele G. 2009. Perspectives on partnership: A literature review. International Potato Center (CIP), Lima, Peru. Working Paper 2009-3.

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Partnerships are a CIP priority and will be the central theme of its forthcoming Annual Report