

## Review

# Promoting effective multi-stakeholder partnership for policy development for smallholder farming systems: A case of the Sub Saharan Africa challenge programme

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**Agricultural policy formulation in Sub Saharan Africa has been dominated by research initiatives that alienated other farmers and stakeholders. The Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Programme (SSA CP) seeks to use multi-stakeholder partnerships as an institutional innovation for agricultural policy formulation and development. This paper uses some experiences from the SSA CP to discuss the design principles for an effective partnership that can deliver relevant agricultural policies. It argues that consultation, negotiation, having a shared understanding of key relationships and interdependence between partners are important principles in multi stakeholder partners. Government's role should be streamlined to be a participant, provider of a conducive environment for policy formulation and provider of public goods.**

**Key words:** Policy, smallholders, partnerships, Africa, agriculture, innovations.

## INTRODUCTION

Most developing countries rely on agriculture as the engine of their economic growth largely because it is the biggest direct employer, with high contribution to Gross National Product (GNP) and foreign currency. It is this realisation that made New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) to seek ways of increasing agricultural growth rate from the current 2 to 6% per annum (Jones, 2005). However, policy making processes in Sub Saharan Africa have failed to provide an optimal policy mix that could increase agricultural productivity among smallholder farmers (Ahmed et al., 2007). Though the policies were perceived to be the best solution to given problems, they were not good enough that all players in the agricultural sector includes public sector (e.g. line ministries, research institutes), private sector (e.g. agro processors, marketers and financial services), and civil society players (for example, NGOs, and unions, advocacy organizations) and the beneficiary communities could agree on and form a basis for collective action

against poor productivity and malnutrition (Jones, 2006). Keeley and Scoones (2000) argue that policy making processes in Sub Saharan Africa are influenced by development discourses (way of thinking and outlook, systems of values and priorities) that marginalise other possible ways of thinking. For example, scientific discourses which have origins in colonial top down and highly centralised administration see development as a rational, technical process grounded in western expertise. For a long time, such discourses served to reduce the role and expertise of smallholders farmers in the policy making process (Leach and Mearns, 1996; Sutton, 1999). These discourses remain so influential that their labels such as 'smallholder', 'peasant', etc., continue to be used to disarm rural farmers and in the process simplifying the complexity of their outlook and the range and diversity of interests that they represent (Sutton, 1999). Unsurprisingly, the role of experts and outsiders in policy making process is thus viewed as indispensable and policy makers continue to base policy decisions on the stories outlined in development narratives (received wisdom) - a legacy of the colonial, science based, centralised top down approaches to development. This desk research seeks to provide a theoretical and

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empirical argument for engaging multi-stakeholder partnership in the policy formulation in smallholder farming system. It draws from worldwide experiences and lessons learnt from Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Programme. The paper also seeks to discuss the conditions under which multi-stakeholder partnerships can be effective in crafting policy decisions. Based on experience, both within the SSA CP and elsewhere, this paper shows the strength of multi-stakeholder partnerships in policy development.

The attainment of political independence led to unprecedented influx of donors in many sub Saharan African countries and the emergence of an epistemic community (research communities, NGOs and international organisations) that purport to have access to privileged information (Sutton, 1999). The epistemic community share similar belief systems, codes of conduct and patterns of behaviour established over time through international conferences and academic papers where they share and discuss ideas. Haas (1992) laments that in developing countries where money for Agriculture Research and Development (ARD) is limited, the epistemic community has served as conduit through which discourses and narratives are transferred from one country onto another. Regrettably, these discourses and narratives cause blue print development, that is, a prescribed set of solutions to an issue/problem used at times and in places where it may not be applicable. Smallholders with no access to information continue to be excluded from policy making processes as global discourses and narratives continue to shape policy options.

Sutton (1999) notes that in the absence of formalised policy making processes in developing countries, agriculture research and development, poverty eradication and reduction strategies remain fragmented, scattered, and hit-and-run initiatives. Where actors are not part of a comprehensive and coherent strategy, and resources are not mustered and harnessed towards integrated and holistic programmes. Karl (2000) concluded that it would be with great difficulty to get any meaningful response to smallholders' needs.

In the context of "governance", crisis regarding the capacity of the formal administrative and political machinery to develop appropriate policies, Morales (2006) argues that institutional innovation should precede technological innovations. He described institutional innovations as changes in the rules and norms of various organizational structures and transactional relationships to produce desired outcomes. Many scholars have advocated for a multi-stakeholder partnership as an institutional innovation that facilitates mutually beneficial, collective action that predispose actors towards cooperation with others in policy making processes (O'Donnell et al., 1998). According to these scholars, the partnership arrangement should embrace an actor-perspective, emphasising the need to take into account the opinions of

individuals, agencies and social groups that have a stake in how agricultural system evolves. The multi-stakeholder partnership is based on the understanding that there is strength in unity and that the total is greater than the sum of individual parts. According to Kalis (2000), such partnership arrangements acknowledge and cement the distinct but complementary and supplementary roles of state and other stakeholders into a synergistic strategy to achieve a shared vision and common goal.

The partnership approach promotes interaction and sharing of ideas between those who make policy and those who are affected most directly by the outcome. If properly institutionalised, structured and regularised partnership arrangement, can go a long way in the development of joint policies and inter-related, comprehensive agriculture research and development programmes. It is because of this shared belief that the Sub Sahara African Challenge Programme attempts to promote the participation of a range of stakeholders in different geographic areas in policy making systems through multi-stakeholder partnerships. The arrangement is based on ongoing dialogue between and among government agencies, farmers, non-governmental organisation and other stakeholders (traders, agro-processors, agro-dealers etc) in crafting key policy issues that will improve, not only the status of smallholder farmers, but all actors involved in the policy making process. The new levels of participation enables the recipients of policy to judge what works, and the policy making process allows feed back into the shared understanding and the strategic focus.

## **MULTI-STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIP IN SSA CP**

The smallholder farmers in most Sub Saharan Africa are faced with agricultural production challenges that include lack of adequate inputs and output markets and no access to credit, poor infrastructure such as roads, communication and irrigation facilities. These factors have contributed, not only to reduced crop yields but poor performances of national economies within SSA. The Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Programme adopted an Integrated Agricultural Research for Development (IAR4D) concept to embed research organisations partnership of diverse stakeholders. This include establishing an innovation platform (IP) where many actors from the public sector (e.g. line ministries, research institutes), private sector (e.g. agro processors, marketers and financial services), civil society players (e.g. NGOs, unions, and advocacy organizations) and the beneficiary communities come together to dialogue. The diversity of stakeholders ensures that smallholder farmers have not only access to competitive agro-inputs, credit facilities and output markets but are also exposed to policy environments for increased technology development, adaptation and subsequent adoption by

smallholder farmers. Also increased net incomes will provide incentives for investment in their ecosystem and reduce overall degradation of the natural resource base.

Besides providing farmers with direct access to timely supply of seed, agrochemicals, credit facilities and output market, innovation platform (IP) also provide direct benefits to all stakeholders involved. Financial institutions get interest through the provision of credit to farmers. Seed houses and agro dealers have a guaranteed market for their products. Agro processors purchase farmers' produce at agreed upon prices. However farmers should continue to have an option to sell to other competitors to keep the producer prices high. The system also ensures adoption of new technologies through the activities of a number of widely different actors and organizations.

The IP are structured as series of linked platforms, existing at different institutional levels vis-a-vis national, district, community. This multi-level platform ensures that innovations (both institutional and technological) take place within a framework of local and national conditions and norms. This ensures that what is produced is relevant and appropriate to all stakeholders involved. The multi layered system of the IP is also a means to overcome barriers to interaction; communication within and between the stakeholder platforms. It also allows horizontal (across platforms) and vertical (between platforms) information and knowledge sharing. Partnership creates a process not only to undertake joint research but also to identify good practices, in both research and development, and future research needs and potential areas for collaboration.

Agricultural research is embedded in set of relationships. According to Hall (2005) embedding research in a system of innovation recognises that it is not just knowledge inputs that are missing, but also the processes necessary to make knowledge available and enable its use are also missing. Participatory action research is used to make knowledge available to others and it allows knowledge generated to be put into effective use through interactive learning. Multi stakeholder participation reduces blueprint thinking that ignores indigenous knowledge. Participatory action research provides a platform where actors are likely to own and apply new ideas that help to improve rural agricultural productivity. All stakeholders should be involved in the identification of a vision for their work which they implement using jointly identified and prioritised actions. They both observe the impacts of their activities and reassess their objectives in the light of observations and reformulate plans for next phase.

## **STRENGTH OF MULTI STAKEHOLDER PARTNERSHIPS**

Multi-stakeholder partnerships bring together complementary institutional capabilities and human resources in the form of skills, experiences and ideas to tackle

common problems that are often beyond the capacity of a single organization or group to create innovations that can be scaled up (Critchley et al., 2006). Equipped with such diverse capabilities partnerships can engage in joint solving of problems, resource exchange, cooperation, coordination and coalition building. Innovation platforms is a means of creating a multi-talented institution with key capabilities to identify problems, prioritize them, generate and implement technologies and develop policy and legislation tools; research and learning; and documentation and dissemination.

Situating research in a wide set of relationships places it closer to all organisations that need to respond to changing production conditions, market fluctuations and trends, and changing policy and regulatory environments. Multi-stakeholder partnerships can provide easy access to information regarding changing contexts and possible future state of policies, markets and technology at least cost. The emergent policy, based on properly managed information and inclusive processes is implemented by a range of bodies, including governmental organisations, private enterprises, and individuals. The implementation teams have access to both vertical and horizontal linkages to facilitate the sharing of consequences of implementation, both positive and negative. The policy making system and the outcomes from policy implementation can be easily examined through self-monitoring and self-evaluation at implementation level. Consequently, strengths and weaknesses of the policy are quickly fed into the vertical level of the partnerships. Knowing the weak and strong points, policy-makers can bring them as a guideline for future policy development.

## **DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR SUCCESSFUL PARTNERSHIPS**

A multi stakeholder partnership policy, agreement or contract should include the philosophy and principles that underpin the partnership, shared values and goals, roles and responsibilities and commitments to action. Otherwise without these, individualists, self centred motives would continue to defragment and disfranchise policy making processes. These design principles are based on discussions with IP actors in Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Program

### **Design principle 1**

A multi stakeholder partnership should involve a combination of consultation, negotiation and bargaining. Partnership should allow for such level of consultation and negotiation that would result in the filling of the investment gap in agricultural development, ensuring that appropriate and relevant services that could otherwise be ignored. It is important to build a mutual respect for each others' roles hence each partner should be well informed of these roles. It is imperative that there is negotiated

agreement on how the respective parties are going to pursue their roles and at the same time contributing towards the attainment of a shared vision and common goal without stepping on each others' feet.

### **Design principle 2**

The partnership process should be heavily dependent upon a shared understanding of the key mechanisms and relationships in any given policy area. This calls for joint research based on a wide range of disciplines and experiences beyond the purely natural sciences realm. The salient assumption that smallholder farmers are not educated, and hence should not participate in research must be abandoned. It is important to allow for what Habermas called 'the ideal speech situation' that is immune to repression and inequity.

### **Design principle 3**

In a partnership, the government should adopt a unique role of providing the arena within which the policy making process operates. A partnership implies that stakeholders are drawn in by Government, in a structured way, to contribute to the legislative and policy-making processes. Since policies directly impact on stakeholders and smallholder farmers, the government should acknowledge them as actors with equity in policy and legislative processes.

### **Design principle 4**

The process should reflect interdependence between the partners. It is imperative for all parties to acknowledge that the partnership is necessary because no party can achieve its goals without a significant degree of support from others. It is important to note that a partnership also implies an inter-relatedness and inter-dependence between the respective parties. A resultant policy which acknowledges this inter-relatedness and inter-dependence provides for communication structures and processes where values, knowledge and skills are shared, where needs, frustrations and aspirations are communicated and responded to. The interdependent and interactive nature of the partnership as a working relationship requires openness, transparency and accessibility between the partners.

### **Design principle 5**

Partnership should be characterised by a problem-solving approach designed to produce consensus, in which various interest groups address joint problems. This approach should be guided by shared vision and common agenda; agreed upon objectives and priorities;

agreed upon roles and policy instruments; openness about self-interests; mutual respect, trust and ability for mutual learning, and agreed upon method of dealing with disagreements. This helps minimise conflict of interests and encourages efficient collaboration among participants.

### **Design principle 6**

Partnership should involve trade-offs both between and within interest groups. Generally gains in one area cause losses in another. An increase in economic gains may compromise environmental quality. For example, heavy use of pesticide increase economic value of agriculture produce by reducing crop losses, but damage the environment and also produce with pesticide residues can be a health hazard. Trade off analysis requires the participation from various groups that can contribute to informed policy development. Whatever the motivation for action, it is essential to find potential allies and partners sharing common or converging values and objectives, or to find acceptable tradeoffs when conflicting interests are unavoidable (Table 1).

## **PERCEIVED IMPACT OF THE RESULTANT POLICY OPTIONS**

Where partnerships are bringing positive benefits to all parties involved, and where actors know that there is power in unity/partnerships they will be motivated to engage in collective action to protect the 'geese that lay golden eggs' – smallholder farmers. This could result in the improvement in the quality of life of smallholders.

Where all members of the partnership are yielding positive gains from the system, they will design policies that also benefit the natural environment, social ties and institutions upon which the relations are based. For instance, to guarantee sustainable economic benefits from the partnership, actors could be attracted to address the integrity of the whole system (natural and social) upon which they dependent on for profit and livelihood. With regards to the natural system, it would be in the interest of all stakeholders to support the natural environment which guarantees sustainable farming. The partnership may in the long run result in overall reduction in conflict, existence of an effective conflict resolution mechanism, and existence of practical and implementable enforcement of contractual agreements creating an environment for the emergence of an enabling social system.

Benefits derived from the partnership create a self propelling and perpetuating institution which seeks to bring satisfactory benefits to all interested parties. Although the initial cost of setting up partnerships may be very high, long term benefits derived by the partnership arrangement create an efficient policy for the institutional sustainability. Whatever costs associated with

**Table 1.** Key ways in which partnership can help to influence policy process.

Stage of the policy process	Key ways to influence policy	How partnership can help
Agenda setting	Convince policy makers that the issue is indeed a problem	Marshall evidence to enhance the credibility of the argument. Foster links between researchers, agro dealers and policy makers
Formulation	Communicate detailed evidence to policy makers and work towards building a well informed consensus	Amplify good quality representative evidence Collaborate with policy makers. Bypass formal barriers to consensus
Implementation	Complement government capacity	Enhance the sustainability and reach of the policy. Act as dynamic platform for action
Evaluation	Collate high quality evidence and channel it into the continuing policy cycle	Provide good quality representative evidence Link policymakers to policy end users
All stages	Capacity building	Foster communication. Provide support and encouragement. Coordinate member evaluations

participation in the partnership will be borne by the individual actors as operation costs.

The horizontal integration of competent agencies in supporting policy-making is considered an efficient approach for achieving the desired result. According to Morales (2006), increased interactions and establishment of a relationship may build trust, depending on how successful the transactions have been, and as a result imperfect information about the other party decreases. Frequent successful exchanges, therefore, lead to decreased transactions cost since trust among economic agents increases and also this creates disincentives for opportunistic behaviour (Paldam and Svendsen, 2000; Sikuta and Cook, 2001).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the promotion of multi stakeholder partnership is important for creating institutions with a common worldview based on the understanding and need for complementarity in capabilities, skills, mutuality. Such an institution will help to redefine stakeholder farmers not as mere recipient of policy but also crafters of the policy that affect them. The paper argues that innovations are therefore needed not only in technology but also in institutions that are characterized by accountability to the poor (empowering them and raising their voices in policy making), strengthening incentives for all stakeholders to actively participate in policy making process for smallholder farming systems. This involves adoption of new roles, and new approaches to the whole process of policy making based on collective learning. For long term sustainability, the paper argues that there should be in-built incentives within a crafted policy that ensures that all stakeholders involved in the formulation process also

benefit during the implementation stage. This will guarantee the long term involvement of all the actors.

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