

Editor's note:

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One plus one equals three: maximizing participation in plant genetic resources networks

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Agricultural researchers are increasingly called upon to address complex issues such as sustainable development and poverty alleviation, in addition to their more traditional task of solving crop production constraints. Research networks have become an essential forum for engaging a variety of stakeholders: scientists, farmers, research coordinators, government officials, technical advisors, secretariat staff and representatives of civil society organizations and donor agencies. Networks allow members to solve problems too broad to be tackled by individual people or institutions, at the same time minimizing duplication of scientific effort. They also promote international communication among colleagues who may otherwise be isolated.

To better understand the dynamics of stakeholder participation, IPGRI undertook a study, in 1999, of four research networks devoted to the conservation and use of plant genetic resources:

- the Lusophone Initiative
- the International Tree Forest Seed Research Network
- the Coconut Genetic Resources Network (COGENT)
- the European Cooperative Programme for Crop Genetic Resources Networks (ECP/GR).

Methodology

The study employed a model that characterizes and compares the nature and extent of participation in decision-making by collaborating parties. In this instance, the two parties were the coordinating institution (IPGRI) and the membership (countries, institutions and individuals in the network). The model was adapted from materials published by the International Service for National Agricultural Research and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.

To capture the complexity of network participation the author used a case study approach and qualitative methodology. Data came from interviews with network coordinators, members and other key informants, as well as from network documents.

Results

In all four instances, the case study confirmed the benefits of network participation for members, which included:

- easier access to information and training materials
- efficiencies of scale from pooling resources
- ability to overcome obstacles that restrict the flow of germplasm and knowledge across borders
- access to funding
- positive employee evaluations in the case of individual scientists participating in the networks.

Members also expressed strong personal commitment to their network's mission and activities. So much so that many reported undertaking heavier-than-normal workloads in order to carry out networking activities because of their strong interest and convictions about its importance. At the institutional level, there was evidence of a parallel commitment via in-kind contributions to network operations. These included laboratory facilities, supplies and hardware, salaries of participating staff, network training support and hosting of meetings. In some cases, members make financial contributions to the network. ECP/GR members, for example, pay dues to support network secretariat and coordinator services and member travel to meetings. Dues are based on a UN formula reflecting member countries' ability to pay.

While member participation is crucial to network success, IPGRI also plays a critical role as the coordinating and host institution. The Institute's staff organize network meetings and training programmes, collect and distribute information among network members,

develop project proposals for external funding, and prepare reports to donor organizations and network members. In addition, the Institute contributes technical expertise to network research, as well as administrative and financial resources. Because of its global profile, IPGRI is also able to garner political support for the networks at international, regional and local levels.

Two key factors were observed to influence members' capacity to participate in network decision-making: 1) the balance between external and member contributions, and 2) the presence or absence of network structures to facilitate participation. External funding was especially important in the network start-up phase. However, excessive external funding support can be detrimental to network success for two reasons. First, it can undermine the sense of self-reliance of the network and cooperation among members. Second, external support often dries up, leaving the network without the resources necessary to operate in cases where alternative funding sources or self-support have not been established.

Problems related to network structure and functions included the following:

- lack of definition of the parameters of membership
- lack of clear definition of membership obligations and authorities
- lack of regular meetings of the membership
- meetings which did not address organizational issues or serve as decision-making fora
- weak mechanisms for representation of subgroups in decision-making.

Conclusions / recommendations

The study draws several conclusions and presents a closely related checklist of practical concerns to help networks improve member involvement.

Key study conclusions are as follows:

- Effective member participation in decision-making requires specific organizational mechanisms. Among the most important is a steering committee that meets regularly and includes subgroup or country representatives. Committee members should be endowed with the resources and authority necessary for decision-making.
- Network members should set clear objectives and principles, accompanied by operating plans. Organizing work into time-bound phases, or operating periods, promotes flexibility and responsiveness. Member countries or institutions can thus periodically evaluate how and whether to continue their investment in the network.
- Membership parameters, along with the responsibilities of coordinators and host institutions, should be clearly defined.
- A sense of ownership of the network is enhanced when members directly "buy into" the network through formal, concrete contributions. These can be regular dues based on an assessment of members' ability to pay, in-kind contributions, or both. One useful option is to assign monetary value to in-kind services (such as housing the network's secretariat or hosting meetings) and then reduce the member's dues proportionately.
- External funding, balanced with internal contributions, should be designed to meet the specific needs and objectives of the network over the long term. Allocation of funds to member institutions rather than the network's host institution can increase member accountability, collaboration and partnership. Networks that rely on project-based external funding should consider tapping each research project to support the costs of network coordination and meetings for decision-making.

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