Funding agricultural research for development: Lessons from PAEPARD

Illustration credit: CTA Top 20 innovations that benefit smallholder farmers (April 2016).
Most agencies supporting agricultural research in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) provide funds for discrete projects over specific periods of time, usually a maximum of three years. Research topics identified for calls for proposals are not always well aligned with users’ needs. In particular, research topics may not reflect the priorities of organizations—such as farmer organizations and private agribusinesses—with interests in the research outcomes; they are not generally supported to play a significant role as project partners. The failure to include relevant stakeholders in decision making, among other factors, impacts the quality of research and severely limits the uptake of research outputs, thereby reducing the potential development impact.

The Platform for an Africa–Europe Partnership in Agricultural Research for Development (PAEPARD) has sought to overcome these shortcomings by mobilizing and supporting multi-stakeholder research consortia to address priority research issues that respond to users’ needs.

In implementing this user-led approach, some key lessons have been learned about funding agricultural research for development (ARD):

- **Conventional competitive funding mechanisms** skew participation towards research organizations with more resources and are therefore not conducive to multi-stakeholder partnerships in which the perspectives of all partners are valued.

- **User-led approaches** offer a practical way to identify priority research issues, encourage the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders, and build trust in the research and innovation process. PAEPARD experience with the development of a users-led process (ULP), with regional farmer organizations at the centre, shows that building such partnerships is effective, but takes time and requires both financial and human resources.

- **There is a gap** between the research priorities of many funding agencies and research users’ needs. Few opportunities exist for demand-led multi-stakeholder research and advocacy is needed to help address this shortfall.

- **Direct engagement** with donors can help to influence their research priorities to leverage more resources for joint research from multiple sources and thereby increase the likelihood that research outputs are taken up by users.

- **Seed funding** for specific activities during the early stages of partnership development can help research consortia sustain their efforts and greatly increase their chances of obtaining support for larger-scale initiatives.

- **A staggered funding** approach, in which research consortia are supported through mechanisms such as inception workshops and workshops, results in the development of high-quality proposals that have a good chance of being successful.

**The benefits** of a multi-stakeholder partnership go far beyond the grants captured by the partners, and the momentum of a winning proposal has proved to be more important than the grant amount.

Some donors, including the European Commission (EC), recognize the need for the active engagement of end users in the identification of research priorities and in the implementation of the research itself. In its approach guide to Research and Innovation: Food & Nutrition Security and Sustainable Agriculture (2014), the EC states that “important lessons are emerging that impacts are more likely to be achieved when research is linked to extension and innovation, and when it is closely aligned with needs of beneficiaries.” However, most funding mechanisms are still not sufficiently flexible to enable an approach that links research and development. For instance, 2016 open call for proposals of the African Union Research Grants considered farmer organizations and industries as ineligible project partners.

The CRF-IF was developed to facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships and has evolved over time in response to lessons learned during the implementation of partnership activities. Despite initial challenges, PAEPARD consortia have been successful in obtaining increasing numbers of grants each year, with a total of 34 proposals gaining funding between 2010 and 2017, and the mobilization of 36,709,844 € through responding to open calls. This amount includes funding for consortia facilitated by PAEPARD, as well as a few related partners (e.g. African universities) that have benefited from technical and financial support during the 12 workshops organized by PAEPARD between 2012 and 2016. The brief summarizes PAEPARD outcomes so far, highlighting lessons and recommendations that may be useful in guiding future decisions on ARD funding mechanisms.
A t the inception of the PAEPARD project, it was agreed that a competitive process would be used to identify multi-stakeholder ARD consortia. The consortia selected were to be given ‘seed funding’ (100-300 K€) to enable the formation of strong partnerships in response to a specific funding opportunity agreed at an inception workshop and to develop research proposals in a subsequent writeshop. The rationale for using a competitive process was to ensure that consortia selection was open, transparent and promoted high quality research.

An open call for research proposals was initially launched in December 2010 with a second call in June 2011. Specific topics were not prescribed in the calls in order to allow room for innovative ideas to emerge in the proposals.

However, it was a call requirement that research teams comprised of multiple actors and involved both African and European partners. The proposed research also had to address a defined development problem and show a clear pathway to impact.

The proposals were evaluated by a panel of ARD practitioners, from among PAEPARD partners, with different disciplinary expertise. The calls attracted practitioners, from among PAEPARD partners, with different disciplinary expertise. The calls attracted practitioners from PAEPARD partners, who did not comply with this request and those who did comply found that the period between the launch of the PAEPARD call and the proposal development writeshop (approximately 12 months) was too long to link to a specific grant call.

Development of the ULP

During the formation of partnerships it also became clear that researchers and other partners sometimes had different expectations of the research objectives and of their roles in the research process, which presented a challenge for effective collaboration. In particular, research users felt they had limited ownership of the partnerships being formed. Indeed, many proposals were judged by the panel of ARD evaluators to inadequately reflect user needs and it was felt that the proposed research was unlikely to deliver developmental impact.

To respond to research users’ concerns about the partnerships, PAEPARD launched the ULP in 2012, which placed farmer organizations at the centre of defining research priorities and designing a research initiative. This approach involved the provision of direct funding from PAEPARD and other forms of support (such as capacity building for proposal development and improved communication mechanisms) over five years. The ULP led to the development of 14 proposals, of which six received grants enabling consortium members to strengthen their partnerships and allowing them to adjust their research plans to respond to emerging funding opportunities.

Limited engagement by European organizations

Another funding issue was revealed during the 2010 and 2011 call process when it became apparent that the European researchers showed a low level of engagement and that participating in the inception workshops held in Africa was limited. Researchers’ feedback during subsequent multi-stakeholder workshops revealed the main reasons for this:

1. The incentive and reward systems for agricultural researchers in European research institutes and universities is heavily weighted towards demonstrating academic excellence through the publication of papers in high-impact and peer-reviewed journals, and there is a perception among researchers that development-oriented research is not conducive to generating such outputs.

2. An increasing number of European research organizations have little or no core funding and rely heavily on project funding to support activities. As a result, research staff have less flexibility to take part in activities, such as workshops, that do not cover salary costs. Researchers also have to make judgements about the probability of success when they are involved in preparing grant proposals, as this is a time-consuming activity that requires financial investment. This has implications for the competitive call process as organizations with a significant amount of core funding are better able to participate.
Table 1: Examples of external funding obtained by PAEPARD consortia (2011-2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Donor research programmes</th>
<th>PAEPARD-supported consortia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&gt; CORAF/WECARD West African Agricultural Productivity Research and Development (WAAPRED), November 2011</td>
<td>&gt; Europe-Africa partnership for setting up a monitoring instrument for family farming in Senegal (extended to several other West African countries including Mali, Burkina Faso, Togo, Benin, Niger)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; The Africa-Brazil Innovation Marketplace, November 2014</td>
<td>&gt; Local seed value chain promotion: farmers led breeding and distribution of green pepper and red pepper varieties, Togo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; Accelerate Agricultural Technology Transfer to Low Income Countries (AgriTT), 2014.</td>
<td>&gt; Partnership for enhanced aquaculture innovation in sub-Saharan Africa (PEAASSA), Malawi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; Sub-Saharan Challenge Programme (SSA CP), 2014.</td>
<td>&gt; Control of angular leaf spot disease in citrus plants in Ghana.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; The Dutch Food and Business Applied Research Fund (ARF), 2013 and March 2014. (Box 1)</td>
<td>&gt; Development of quality based potato seed innovations for small-scale farmers in the three provinces surrounding Bujumbura town in Burundi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt; Systemic approach to overcoming the constraints of production and marketing of indigenous vegetables in Western Kenya, Kenya.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Food & Business Applied Research Fund (ARF)

> The Food & Business ARF supported by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS), is an example of a programme that commissions inter-disciplinary research conducted by multi-actor teams. The ARF aims to promote research that leads to innovations which enhance sustainable food security for the most vulnerable populations in 15 partner countries of the Netherlands development cooperation.

> The programme provided an opportunity for PAEPARD to help build consortia with partners from selected SSA countries (Benin, Burundi, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda) and the Netherlands. An initial conviction of this partnership development was that organizations in the Netherlands were not eligible to recover the full costs they incurred in implementing activities. As a result, some organizations decided that they were unable to participate.

> PAEPARD lent its support to the managing organization (NWIO-WOTRO) requesting a change in these regulations and DGIS has subsequently modified them to make participation more attractive for organizations that are funded through the project, rather than through institutional mechanisms. So far, ten projects from four PAEPARD supported consortia and two facilitated by PAEPARD have been funded through the ARF, which is a high rate and a very positive label to the PAEPARD approach.

The Food & Business ARF supported by the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS), is an example of a programme that commissions inter-disciplinary research conducted by multi-actor teams. The ARF aims to promote research that leads to innovations which enhance sustainable food security for the most vulnerable populations in 15 partner countries of the Netherlands development cooperation.

The programme provided an opportunity for PAEPARD to help build consortia with partners from selected SSA countries (Benin, Burundi, Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda and Uganda) and the Netherlands. An initial conviction of this partnership development was that organizations in the Netherlands were not eligible to recover the full costs they incurred in implementing activities. As a result, some organizations decided that they were unable to participate.

PAEPARD lent its support to the managing organization (NWIO-WOTRO) requesting a change in these regulations and DGIS has subsequently modified them to make participation more attractive for organizations that are funded through the project, rather than through institutional mechanisms. So far, ten projects from four PAEPARD supported consortia and two facilitated by PAEPARD have been funded through the ARF, which is a high rate and a very positive label to the PAEPARD approach.

Eligible activities for ARF awards included short studies, workshops, meetings, workshops and exchange visits. PAEPARD stakeholder consultations revealed that access to finance was crucial to multi-actor consortia cohesion during the partnership building stage. In some cases, partners were able to make a small financial contribution from their own resources. However, experience showed that it was important to have access to relatively small additional sources of funding in order to sustain the partnership, especially through engagement in activities such as exchange visits and participation in agricultural fairs. Together with the inception workshops and workshops, the activities supported through the ARF were effective in assisting consortia to develop strong research proposals.

Development impact of CRF supported projects

In June 2014, the PAEPARD Steering Committee approved four proposals under the first component of the CRF-IF. Three of the successful proposals originated from the consortia selected in the PAEPARD calls and one ULP consortium was approved for funding. The low success rate of the ULP consortia was surprising and may be partly explained by the fact that most ULP partnerships were not as far advanced in their research planning as the consortia established earlier. However, the ULP consortium that successfully secured CRF-IF funds has shown that a demand-led, user-oriented research approach could begin to deliver benefits to rural households in a relatively short-period of time (see Box 2).

Minimizing the risk of aflatoxin contamination in groundnuts (ULP consortium)

> In the successful CRF-IF ULP project, the National Association of Smallholder Farmers (NASFAM) in Malawi is collaborating with partner organizations in Zambia, South Africa and the UK to identify ways to minimize the risk of aflatoxin occurrence in groundnuts. The research is being conducted with farmers and agricultural advisory services to enhance the exchange of ideas and support knowledge sharing. Farmers have helped identify the pre- and post-harvest practices being tested to reduce aflatoxin risk and several hundred farmers are directly involved in the research. As a result, many farmers are already beginning to modify their practices, increasing their yields and income at the same time as managing the aflatoxin risk.
The three consortia from the PAEPARD calls that were awarded CRF-funds have strong multi-actor partnerships and are conducting applied research that, based on preliminary results, has a high probability of improving the livelihoods of large numbers of rural households (Boxes 3-5). However, in view of the continued separation of research and development funding, consortia were advised by PAEPARD to develop a diverse funding portfolio. The idea was for projects to obtain funding from different sources by developing several complementary proposals tailored to the research interests of different donors. This approach has been successfully used by the consortium working in the soybean value chain in Benin (Box 5), and later by non-CRF consortia facilitated but not funded by PAEPARD.

A real momentum in success was observed, with more efforts, conviction and willingness to partner again after a first granted proposal, whatever the amount, than after a failure, whatever the reason. The leader of the Trichoderma consortium in Burkina Faso started with very limited support (from the UN-Environment consortium in Burkina Faso) and accumulated year after year subsidies and awards (e.g., 42,000 € from the French President Programme “La France s’engage au Sud” in 2016). Several consortia who were not successful after one attempt gave up, whereas those persisting and benefiting from advice (mainly during workshops and sometimes from external facilitators) adapted the funding targets to their capacities and often succeeded after 3-4 attempts. This was the case for the Ghana-citrus and the Togo-pepper consortia, receiving funds from FARA (SSA Challenge Programme) and the Africa-Brazil Marketplace programme, respectively.

The national impact of these successes was important for the visibility of the consortium of course, and for the influence it had on policy makers (in Ghana, in particular, the citrus value chain received much more attention from the government).
PAEPARD has clearly shown that multi-stakeholder partnerships require more time to develop trust between participating stakeholders and access the necessary funds than is normally expected by competitive funding mechanisms.

The establishment of such partnerships usually requires some financial support to allow partners to meet and clarify their objectives, roles and responsibilities. PAEPARD has responded to this need as a brokerage body by introducing the ULP approach and giving support to consortia in the form of capacity strengthening via workshops, writeshops and exchange visits.

As a result, although only a few suitable competitive funding calls were issued between 2010 and 2017, PAEPARD consortia have been successful in obtaining more and more grants per year, with 34 funded proposals out of a total of 88 submissions during this period.

The total funds mobilized through applications responding to open calls amount to 36,709,844 €. This includes the consortia facilitated by PAEPARD and a few related partners as well (African universities).

The CRF projects supported by PAEPARD are already generating research outputs that are benefitting rural households demonstrating that user-led multi-stakeholder partnerships can deliver developmental impact. Nevertheless, certain challenges remain, including:

- A mismatch between the priorities of many funding agencies and those of research users;
- The prevalence of short-term projects rather than long-term programmes, and inadequate resource provisions for multi-stakeholder partnerships;
- The limited time between the launching of calls and the submission deadline, which does not allow a sufficient period for preparing solid proposals;
- The difficulty in engaging European partners in ARD initiatives in Africa, mainly due to funding constraints and a lack of alignment in incentive structures.

PAEPARD has engaged with national and international agencies that fund agricultural research to make a case for greater use of multi-stakeholder demand-led approaches.

Unfortunately, the number of research programmes that fully embrace these approaches remains limited, but this may change as evidence of the benefits they bring increases.

PAEPARD will therefore continue to advocate for wider adoption of the multi-stakeholder approach and the positive results arising from all the consortia will be documented and used as evidence to support the argument. Meanwhile, based on the experience of PAEPARD consortia, the following recommendations are made:

1. Before an ARD programme is launched, funding agencies should engage in a consultation process with a wide range of stakeholders to establish shared research priorities. Face-to-face meetings may be combined with an online consultation to make the process as inclusive as possible.

2. Funding agencies should consider the use of open funds rather than time-restricted calls for proposals. Multi-stakeholder partnerships should be encouraged and research users should be fully engaged in the development of ARD proposals.

3. A staggered process should be used to allow partnerships to be consolidated and research ideas confirmed. An initial expression of interest may serve to identify consortia that meet agreed criteria. Resources may then be allocated to enable consortia to develop a concept note and, if the concept note is assessed favourably, to prepare a proposal.

4. Inception workshops and writeshops are an effective means of supporting consortia to develop strong proposals during a staggered funding process. Although these carry costs, there is a net benefit through the preparation of high quality proposals that are likely to achieve success.

5. European funding agencies should allocate sufficient resources to allow researchers from Europe to participate effectively in the proposal development process for Africa-Europe ARD partnerships.

PAEPARD supported Africa-Europe partnerships invested resources and capacities (informal, local and often women’s markets) in innovation where public research seldom does. (See photo for leafy vegetables in Benin).
The Platform for Africa-Europe Partnership in Agricultural Research for Development (PAEPARD) is a 8-year project sponsored by the European Commission (80%) and partners’ own contribution (20%). It is coordinated by the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) since December 2009, and extended until end of 2017. It aims at building joint African-European multi-stakeholder partnerships in agricultural research for development (ARD) contributing to achieving the Millennium Development Goals. On the European side, the partners are AGRINATURA (The European Alliance on Agriculture Knowledge for Development, coordinating the European partners), COLEACP (representing the private sector), CSA (representing the NGOs), ICRA, specialized in capacity building in ARD, and the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation (CTA). On the African side and in addition to FARA, the partners are the Pan-African Farmers Organization (PAFO), the Regional Universities Forum for Capacity Building in Agriculture (RUFORUM) based in Kampala, and the Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN) based in Pretoria. PAFO involves its members that are the Eastern Africa Farmers Federation (EAFF) based in Nairobi, the Réseaux des Organisations Paysannes et des Producteurs d’Afrique de l’Ouest (ROPPA) based in Ouagadougou, and the Plate-forme Régionale des Organisations Paysannes d’Afrique Centrale (PROPAC) based in Yaoundé. The Southern African Confederation of Agricultural Unions (SACAU) is an associate partner of PAEPARD.

Disclaimer: «This project has been funded with the support of the European Commission’s Directorate-General for International Cooperation and Development (DG-DevCo). This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Union cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein».

www.paepard.org
paepard@dgroups.org
twitter.com/PAEPARD facebook.com/PAEPARD paepard.blogspot.fr