Some NGO views on international collaboration in ecoregional programmes

Ann Waters-Bayer
AGRECOL Germany, ETC Ecoculture Netherlands and CGIAR NGO Committee

Own involvement
First of all, let me make clear that I am not directly involved in any ecoregional programme (ERP). I am a member of the CGIAR NGO Committee, which is concerned, among other things, with forging partnership between the Centres and NGOs. We see the ERPs as an opportunity for such partnership, as they are meant to bring together organisations concerned with research and development for food security, linking agricultural production and natural resource management (NRM). I have therefore been following reports of the ERPs and seeking NGO views about them. I am most familiar with AHI because of my own work in East Africa advising a programme that promotes farmer innovation in land husbandry.

In preparation for the workshop and seminar this week, I sought the views within the NGO Committee, searched in the web and contacted persons in Centres to find out which NGOs are collaborating with ERPs, and took up email contact with some of these NGOs about their experiences. In addition to responses from six present and former members of the NGOC, I heard from ten NGOs connected in some way with four ERPS: AHI, CONDESAN, EcoR-I and RWC-IGP. I did not manage to contact any NGOs involved in the other three ERPs discussed at this seminar (EPHTA, IVC, TLAP). In their responses, the smaller NGOs seemed to have difficulties in distinguishing between ERPs and other forms of interaction with Centres.

Role of NGOs and forms of collaboration
The NGOs' perceptions of their roles in interaction with research centres coloured their perception of partnership within the ERPs. Some NGOs regard themselves purely as the final link in the transfer of technology paradigm: they do the transferring. They were satisfied to have received genetic materials, technologies, technical advice or related training from the Centres. However, other NGOs concerned with ecological agriculture and NRM do not accept a role restricted to technology dissemination, for two reasons:

1. They feel that formal research is alienated from the realities in the field and is not providing the types of technologies suitable for their partners – resource-poor farmers, often living in marginal areas – and they therefore have to develop such appropriate technologies themselves together with the farmers.

2. They feel that simply transferring a technology developed elsewhere will not strengthen the capacity of farmers to adjust to changing conditions and opportunities – and that the key to sustainability in agriculture and NRM lies in this local capacity to adjust and to innovate.

These NGOs are encouraging farmers to experiment, with the support of technical specialists from the formal research and development sector. These are the NGOs that are most critical of the type of collaboration they have experienced in the ERPs and in other interactions with the Centres. They are interested in being involved in setting priorities for research, in planning the specific research projects, in carrying out the research together with farmers and scientists, and in disseminating not only farmer-tested successful technologies but also the approach to promoting farmer experimentation and innovation processes.

The view was expressed that the international research centres should leave it up to NGOs, national agricultural research institutes (NARIs) and extension services, working closely with

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farmers, to do the applied and adaptive research, while the Centres focus on generating knowledge about the mechanisms that lead to the field results. The Centres' research agenda should be driven by demand for this knowledge, coming from below. The Centres also have an important role to play in building up the capacities of NARIs and NGOs so that they can translate this knowledge into information that is useful for supporting local research and development processes.

This reflects some of the visions that these NGOs have for their interaction with the Centres. Especially people in this type of NGO expressed the feeling that, when they (along with farmers' and community-based organisations) were involved in initial workshops to launch an ERP or to be consulted about regional research needs, they were merely being used to give legitimacy to the programme – through inclusion in the list of participants – and thus to gain financial resources. Subsequently, the Centres defined the research agenda themselves and used the funds primarily for their own activities or, at the most, for some activities of the NARIs.

Where collaboration did continue, it is not always with the NGO as such but rather with an individual from the NGO who was working in a project under the umbrella of the ERP. Most national and smaller NGOs operate on the basis of discretely funded projects, also to cover staff salaries, and do not have unrestricted funds that they can invest in ecoregional collaboration or networking. Some NGO people perceive the researchers in the Centres, including the coordinators of the ERPs, as operating on core or programme funds, whereas the NGO people have to invest their unpaid (non-project) time in the networking involved in the ERP. The uncertainty of funding in most NGOs makes it very difficult for them to enter into longer-term (several-year) research agreements, and they have no ability to "match" financially any kind of activity within the ERP, not even by making "in-kind" contributions, e.g. staff time. This constrains the ability of NGOs to support or to take advantage of ERPs, unless the research and development activities are planned to fit directly into the NGOs' current projects.

The forms of collaboration mentioned by NGOs who were contacted because they were reportedly involved in an ERP included:

- no further involvement after an initial workshop
- very peripheral involvement (e.g. some scientists and students involved in the ERP visited the NGO field sites)
- providing data for regional database and taking part in regional information network
- joint Rapid/Participatory Rural Appraisal (RRA/PRA) studies
- joint development of proposals for adaptive research and extension (but, in most cases, funds had not yet been obtained)
- collaboration in setting up platforms (*mesas de concertacion*) of local institutions for NRM planning
- participating in workshops and meetings to discuss research methods and results
- most commonly: facilitating on-farm testing and/or dissemination of specific crops or farming techniques suggested by the programmes.

In two cases, the NGOs were primarily independent research institutes; these were involved in implementing research and felt they were treated as equal partners by the Centres in the ERPs.

**Strengths and weaknesses**

The NGOs particularly appreciated the opportunities offered by some Centres for information exchange and learning during training courses, travelling seminars, e-conferences and participation in international conferences, but it was not always clear if this was in connection with an ERP or other activities of the Centres. Databases on methods in NRM research and development work in comparable areas were appreciated, as were discussions of relevant
experiences and processes. Good marks were received by AHI and CONDESAN to the extent that they had opened up to a wider range of partners and operated in a networking mode.

The NGOs mentioned the following weaknesses of the ERPs with which they were in contact (not all comments apply to all programmes):

- lack of clarity of the role of the ERP: to fill research gaps not covered by the other actors in the region? to coordinate or to implement research on the ground? to facilitate networking? to scale up?
- lack of clarity of the roles of the partners within the ERP, because clear agreements and Terms of Reference were not worked out; also the potential benefits were not clear, particularly for the farmers
- too much time devoted to meetings, coordination and creating databases during a long start-up phase, but very little concrete research activity
- high expenditures for the convening workshops but then a lack of donor support for the proposed collaborative research
- lack of transparency regarding availability or use of funds
- little or no genuine involvement of NGOs in the overall planning of the ERP and, in some cases, in the planning of research projects under the programme umbrella; where the NGOs were involved in project planning, these were sometimes merely their own NGO activities at their field sites, which they reported to the ERP and which were then reported to the outside world as activities conducted at the ERP benchmark sites
- tendency to work in relative isolation in a small space within the watershed without links to local NGOs, community-based organisations and local academics working in the same area
- many activities under the “ecoregional” banner are simply a continuation of the conventional commodity-oriented production-enhancement research of the Centres
- too much emphasis on describing the benchmark sites and, even then, primarily only in biophysical terms, whereas social, political and institutional aspects are much more important for sustainable agriculture and NRM
- too much emphasis on complicated techniques in computer-based modelling and GIS that are of little use for research and development in the South
- even NGOs in contact with an ERP felt that they were not sufficiently aware of the various programmes; some NGOs admitted that it is partly their own fault, as they have not made the effort to seek the information
- with the exception of the above-mentioned research institutes and one large national NGO (at least at the initial planning workshop), the NGOs did not experience genuine partnership with the other stakeholders (Centres, NARIs) in the sense of mutual accountability and shared responsibility.

**Opportunities and threats**

Despite all of these weaknesses, the NGOs that have been in contact with ERPs strongly support the principles behind them and wish that they would be applied. A desire was expressed to really plan and implement activities together with scientists, with listening and learning on both sides. NGOs that are working in the field with resource-poor farmers feel that they can offer to these programmes: 1) their knowledge of the on-the-ground realities of the farmers, and 2) their insights and experience in innovative approaches to extension and service delivery (which can also be a topic of research), farmer experimentation and local capacity building. They welcome closer interaction with research centres for sharing of ideas and materials, cross visits, training and follow-up coaching and advice in some aspects of research, and in joint analysis of the outcomes of farmer-led research.
One large national NGO in Latin America felt that it had been quite successful on its own in scaling up agro-ecological approaches and wanted to have closer interaction with the ERP in its area in order to discuss and disseminate the NGO’s outcomes, including the methodology it had developed (without the ERP’s support) to measure impact on rural development. Another large development-support NGO in Asia, which has its own research scientists and infrastructure, proposed that regional research substations be set up at its sites. An NGO that supports farmers’ research in several countries in Africa and is keen to collaborate more closely with formal research centres and networks (national and international) has set up a Regional Research Support office; among other things, this should facilitate contacts between their projects and regional research programmes.

Based on their experience thus far, the major threats that NGOs mentioned when referring to future regional research collaboration were the following:

- Researchers from the Centres, particularly the technical scientists, will continue to dominate the programmes and follow their own agenda, not being willing to share responsibilities and resources with NGOs and other actors in national agricultural research systems (NARS); NGOs will be used only to gather data for research and to disseminate results, but will not be accepted as real partners in the research process.
- Donors will not give strong support to regional research, as this would require closer collaboration between donors and a change in donor procedures.

**Recommendations and next steps**

Some of the recommendations made by NGOs for future regional research collaboration were:

- The ecoregions should be based much more deliberately on political and administrative regions so as to facilitate alliances in development-oriented research, including policy and institutional aspects.
- The number of ERPs should be limited to a few that can obtain sufficient funds to sustain actual research to be implemented by the stakeholders within the NARS of the region.
- The ERPs must have a much stronger input of social sciences (not just economics), including training of the technical scientists in communication techniques and multidisciplinary teamwork.
- More NGOs should be involved in the ERPs but, rather than bringing together many organisations that may be motivated only by prospects of gaining access to funds, collaboration should start with those NGOs that are already working closely with farmers in developing and testing innovations that farmers regard as useful and build up from there, strengthening and broadening alliances based on real work in the field.
- The ERPs can play an important role in developing R&D methods in NRM, but these should be methods applicable by organisations in the South with limited equipment and financial resources.
- The ERPs should be more open and inclusive so that they can operate in a more multifunctional way, combine available resources and skills, and achieve cooperation among all the types of local institutions that are needed for a holistic approach to NRM.
- Greater opportunities should be created for staff of NGOs to share information and experiences with other partners and to gain a clearer overview of the ERP of which they are a part. For this purpose, brief but intensive learning workshops are more valuable than electronic exchange stretched over longer periods, as the latter is difficult to combine with work in the field.
- Within the jointly-designed broad ERPs, there should be competitive grant schemes for specific projects, open to NARIs, universities and NGOs with a proven track record in development-oriented research. NGOs and SFOs should be involved in defining the criteria for evaluating the project proposals, and NGOs and SFOs that are not competing for the specific grants should be involved in the evaluation of the proposals.
• Centres can serve a useful role as conveners of agriculture R&D consortia but should regard themselves as facilitators rather than implementers; as capacities and experiences in collaboration are built up, the consortia should be free to decide if the convening power is still necessary and, if so, who among the partners will have this responsibility.

• NGOs and SFOs should be involved in ERP steering groups at subnational, national and international levels, as well as in monitoring and evaluating the outputs of the programmes.

• External reviews should examine the aspects of partnerships, division of responsibilities, transparency and accountability within the ERPs.

• NGOs and SFOs must make a concerted effort to obtain external funding that will allow them to make strong inputs into the process of regional priority setting and in designing and implementing ERPs.

**Final warning**

I must end with a warning: It was striking in reviewing the history of the ERPs that these were set up for reasons very similar to those now given for setting up Global Challenge Programmes (GCPs). There was also talk of channelling a significant part of CGIAR funds to the ERPs: TAC proposed 39% of core spending. Now, ten years after the CG formally adopted the ecoregional approach, I understand that only 6% of CG funds goes to ecoregional AND systemwide programmes together. If donors do not truly commit themselves to support these large interdisciplinary international programmes of R&D to solve major problems identified by stakeholders – including commitment of funds to build up multi-stakeholder consortia with strong NGO and SFO involvement and to develop fundable proposals – then the GCPs will face the same problems as the ERPs.

**Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank the members of the NGO Committee and the individuals in NGOs who gave time and thought to responding to my questions about the ERPs. Many respondents preferred to be mentioned simply as “reliable informants”, and stressed that they still see possibilities for more fruitful interaction between NGOs and other stakeholder groups within ERPs or similar constellations.