

Chapter 13

Participatory Project Planning Process: LI-BIRD's Experience and Lessons Learned

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This paper describes LI-BIRD's experiences and the lessons learned on the participatory project planning process while implementing the In Situ Crop Conservation Project in partnership with the National Agricultural Research Centre and the International Plant Genetics Resources Institute.

LI-BIRD has a history of implementing projects in a participatory manner. The participation of client beneficiaries starts from the project proposal development phase, in which applying participatory approaches and the interest of stakeholders are understood. Site selection is accomplished using participatory rural appraisal approaches. Communities from selected areas participate intensely in designing and planning the course of project activities.

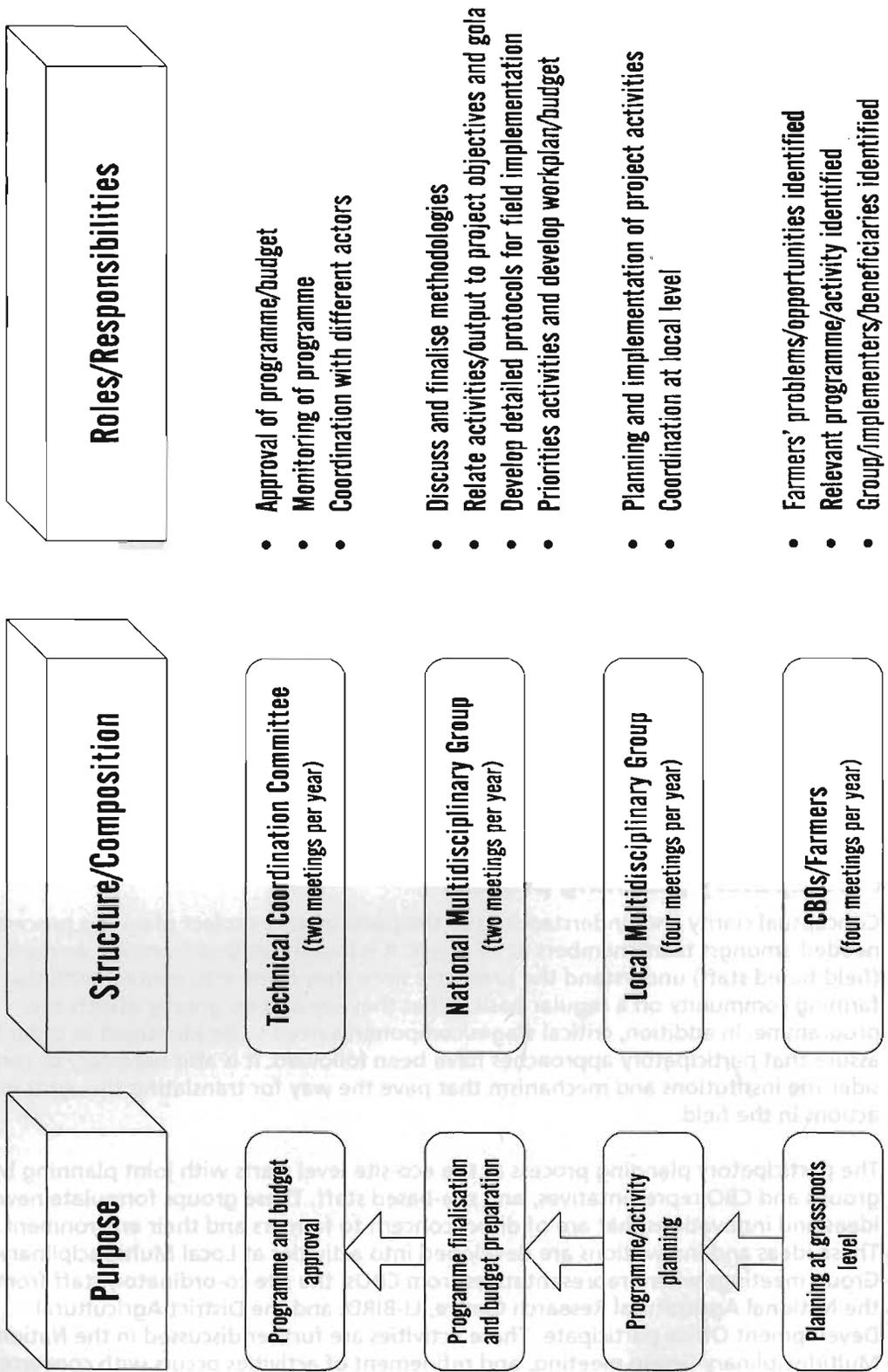
Usually, a group approach is followed to reach to the farming community, and programme planning starts at the individual group level. From there on, initiatives move to the Local Multidisciplinary Group, the National Multidisciplinary Group, and, finally, to the Technical Co-ordination Committee for approval. The planning process can be divided into three distinct components: steps/process, structures and mechanisms, and roles and responsibilities. The basic structure of the process is shown in Figure 5.

Participatory planning process

Conceptual clarity and understanding of the participatory project planning process is needed amongst team members at all levels. It is important that frontline workers (field-based staff) understand the processes since they come into contact with the farming community on a regular basis. What they say and do greatly affects the programme. In addition, critical stages/components need to be identified in order to assure that participatory approaches have been followed. It is also necessary to consider the institutions and mechanism that pave the way for translating thoughts into actions in the field.

The participatory planning process at the eco-site level starts with joint planning by groups and CBO representatives, and site-based staff. These groups formulate new ideas and innovations that are of direct concern to farmers and their environment. These ideas and innovations are developed into activities at Local Multidisciplinary Group meetings where representatives from CBOs, the site co-ordinator, staff from the National Agricultural Research Centre, LI-BIRD, and the District Agricultural Development Office participate. These activities are further discussed in the National Multidisciplinary Group meeting, and refinement of activities occurs with concurrent

Figure 5: Planning and information flow process for *in situ* project, Nepal



development of budget for agreed activities. Finally, the plan of agreed activities with its budget is submitted to the Technical Co-ordination Committee for approval. The agreed programme is conveyed back to the site co-ordinator for field implementation at site level. This information is relayed back to groups and CBOs for their involvement in the programme. In another instance, such as value addition through non-breeding approaches, there are CBO-strengthening and community awareness activities in which CBOs prepare their activities and budget, and implement the activities in the field. At the end of the agreement period (every six months), they provide a technical report and a financial statement to the project. This arrangement allows CBO members to manage the programme and the resources independently; this enhances technical as well as managerial capabilities. Hence, the planning process provides an interactive learning environment where project staff and representatives from different groups interact and share their experiences and ideas in an open manner.

Creation of institutions and mechanism

Creation or development of institutions and mechanisms lends credit and shape to the concepts and processes that are envisaged in the project. Development of a transparent and functional modus operandi should emerge from the planning meetings conducted at the initial stages of the project. However, to facilitate collaboration, a formal signing of a memorandum of understanding is desirable, especially where upper-level officials are frequently transferred. This can provide continuity and commitment at the institutional level rather than from individuals (Jarvis et al. 2000). A Local Multidisciplinary Group comprising members from the National Agricultural Research Centre, LI-BIRD, the District Agricultural Development Office, CBOs, and others is created at site level. This group is primarily concerned with bottom-up planning at the local level, and field execution of approved project activities. Similarly, there is a National Multidisciplinary Group representing members from different research themes, site co-ordinators, field officers, representatives from the International Plant Genetics Resources Institute, the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, the Department of Agriculture, and the National Project Co-ordinator. This body is essentially the 'think tank' of the project entrusted with streamlining research activities, testing new methodologies, screening activities developed by the Local Multidisciplinary Group, and preparing a budget for approved activities. Finally, a Technical Co-ordination Committee is the highest decision-making body with representative members from the National Agricultural Research Centre, the International Plant Genetics Resources Institute, the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives, the Department of Agriculture, and the National Project Co-ordinator. This body is mainly responsible for approving the programme and the budget. It also monitors and supervises project activities and outputs.

In the project, farmers and their organisations (CBOs) represent one of the partners. They need adequate representation through various mechanisms; their voice needs to be heard. One effective way is to include CBO representatives (two, in this case) in structures created at different levels. Until now, CBO representatives have been included in the Local Multidisciplinary Group only; ways are being sought to extend participation to the National Multidisciplinary Group.

Local Multidisciplinary Group meetings are organised locally; they meet frequently. Technical Co-ordination Committee meetings are normally conducted twice a year. These meetings are crucial not only to developing work plans and budget at six-monthly intervals, but also to sharing experiences and promulgation of 'good practices' across project sites.

Defining clear roles and responsibilities

In order to minimise misunderstandings amongst team members, it is imperative to have a clear definition of roles and responsibilities at the onset of the project; they can be modified as the project progresses. Involvement of major stakeholders when developing roles and responsibilities, followed by agreement of the individuals and institutions involved, is a major step in the process. During the planning meeting, commitment is required from individual people associated with the project. Once commitment is forthcoming, then members become accountable for their outputs. Owing to peer pressure, professionals tend to abide by their commitments. Institutional commitment is equally important, especially in terms of releasing concerned staff for the project and reducing the frequency of staff turnover.

Detailed activity planning, including a timeframe, persons to be involved, identification of lead person, and resources required, is planned and agreed jointly. A hardcopy of the programme is made available to all participants before they depart to their respective organisations. This step is important since the phenomenon 'out of sight, out of mind' is common, and having a hardcopy reminds one of commitments and dates.

Management of Migratory Sheep and Goat Project

Capitalising on the experiences gained by LI-BIRD working with a multidisciplinary team in a multi-institutional setting, the Migratory Sheep and Goat Project, funded by the Hill Agriculture Research Project, has taken a shape that is expected to lead to stipulated outputs. The first meeting of concerned institutions agreed the following.

- Working mechanism (project management team, tri-monthly meetings, reporting system, financial norms, etc.)
- Roles and responsibilities of professional staff
- Detailed activities with timeframe
- Remit for community participation
- Monitoring of field activities

Detailed activity planning, including involvement of professionals and timeframe, was agreed. Similarly, an entry point to the community was agreed, and ways to seek community participation and strengthen local institutions were discussed. These will be implemented in the field. These steps not only fulfil project objectives but also enhance the working relationships between researchers and farmers, and between researchers themselves.

Project management team

For successful completion of the project, experiences have shown that a Project Management Team is necessary when multiple institutions are involved and the

operational area is dispersed. Decentralised decision-making is warranted. Selected individuals from partner institutions form a Project Management Team, and jointly make decisions on practical matters such as flow of information, communication modes, and hierarchy (technical, administrative and financial matters). It is more practical and easier for a smaller group to meet rather than waiting for a whole project team to decide on specific matters. This arrangement is expected to expedite the decision-making process, and keep all concerned informed about what is happening.

Tri-monthly meeting of team members

Provision of a suitable environment to discuss, plan, and review project activities on a regular basis is a must for a desirable outcome to the project. Realising this, the first planning meeting decided that project team members should meet once every three months. This forum is expected to provide a platform where open discussion, and sharing of experiences and ideas will take place. Review of progress will be monitored during the meeting. Also, team members will jointly deal with problems encountered while implementing the project.

Financial management of the project

This is one area where misunderstanding between partners usually runs high. Individual institutions have their own norms for financial disbursement. Therefore, it is wise to allocate the budget to individual institutions in a decentralised manner based on involvement of professionals in different activities. Moreover, the financial management system has to be transparent and accountable regarding the utilisation of funds. By releasing the funds at short intervals (six months), the management of project finances can be closely monitored.

Lessons learnt

The following lessons have been learned by practitioners of the participatory project planning approach.

- Intense interaction and sharing, promoted through participatory project planning, has been fruitful in programme development; it better matches activities with farmers' needs and priorities.
- Formal signing of a memorandum of understanding is desirable between partners, and even with partnership programmes at the grassroots level.
- Management support and structure/institutions are needed.
- Flexibility and commitment of team members towards the approach are needed.
- Reorientation of staff and others involved with the work is needed for this approach process as well as practical tips.
- Objectives need to be clear to staff involved at all levels.
- Financial responsibility is required. It is desirable to have a decentralised system with individual institutions made responsible and accountable.
- A Project Management Team is useful for quick decision-making and to foster teamwork when multiple institutions are involved and frequent communication amongst team members is not possible.
- Decisions have to be documented and widely circulated amongst team members.

- Protocols for field implementation of programmes and activities are needed to avoid confusion.
- Realisation of partners' strengths is essential; try to capitalise on these.
- Leave enough space for each professional to grow individually (career advancement in chosen field) and collectively (contributes as team member).

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the participatory approach takes time. Genuine participation comes only when adequate time is spent listening to client beneficiaries in the planning process. This holds true for partnerships as well. There have to be clear advantages to the partnership with a synergistic effect on partners; mutual trust is crucial for genuine partnership to take shape. Partners take time to understand each other and the working cultures of other institutions. Hence, patience is required at both the individual and institutional level.

References

- Jarvis, D.; Sthapit, B.; Sears, L. (eds) (2000) *Conserving Agricultural Biodiversity In Situ A Scientific Basis for Sustainable Agriculture*. Rome: International Plant Genetic Resources Institute