

Mobilising our greatest resource  
for continuity and change:

# people

The establishment of strong and efficient partnerships can contribute enormously to family farming, in many different ways. All efforts to enhance learning, however, must ensure that local people remain in control of the process. External agents need to be very aware of the role they want to take and of the role they are in effect taking.

Text and photo: Stephen Sherwood

**W**hile facilitators of technology-centred approaches tend to preoccupy themselves with “what farmers do not do” and on “how to get them to farm differently”, a people-centred approach seeks to help farmers understand what they do and why as a source of inspiration for continuity and change. This must be our point of departure when looking at partnerships, or at the role that “outsiders” play in promoting learning that is founded on local experience.

Critics of externally led rural development rightfully raise serious concerns over the influence of outsiders in local development. We call special attention to the moral and ethical obligations that an externally based organiser – be it a farmer from another community or someone from a nearby city or another country – is as transparent as possible about her or his worldview, motivations and agenda in seeking a partnership for change.

This edition of *Farming Matters* presents a diversity of learning-based approaches. Here, I highlight a handful of ideas on rural education that came to mind upon my perusal of the articles, before summarising some thoughts on effective partnerships for learning.

### Culture as the seedbed of learning

In his provocative book, “A short history of progress”, the anthropologist Ronald Wright explains that, from a biological perspective, humans are no

smarter today than they were 10,000 years ago. In other words, an ice-age child could be reared in a modern family and, afforded the right nurturing and opportunities, he or she could perform perfectly well and have every bit the same chances as any child in excelling in school and becoming a medical doctor. This insight is a sharp criticism of most modern education programmes, but it is consistent with the sort of approaches that ILEIA has been championing for the last 26 years.

Wright convincingly argues that knowledge is not stored in the brain; rather, it is embedded in culture. Similarly, farmers belong to communities of practice and, as such, they contribute to and learn from unfolding histories. In this sense, learning is about routine – reproducing age-old traditions expressed, for example, in a certain way of planting. But agriculture, of course, is not static. Each time a farmer drops her seed it falls into an ever-changing world. Learning is also about change – occasionally breaking with time-honoured practice and giving birth to future tradition.

### Cultivating the human farm

The Honduran educator and farmer-philosopher, the late Elias Sanchez, inspired a passion for popular education in thousands of community organisers. Elias argued that, at the most basic level, learning involves “cultivating the human farm”. He summarised learning as the process of managing the “head”, the “heart” and the “hands”. His ideas were based on a fundamental tenet of individual learning described

by Benjamin Bloom as “domains of knowledge”: cognition (mental skills – the ability to associate, comprehend, and think creatively), affective capacity (the ability to grow emotionally and have feelings, to value and find inspiration for action), and psychomotor skills (the ability to perform manual and physical skills). Accordingly, effective learning involves the simultaneous “cultivation” of each. Neglect the head, heart or hands, Elias said, and learning is incomplete – the human farm collapses.

In this issue, Winarto and colleagues (p. 10) explain how outsiders helped Indonesian farmers to “read” and interpret rainfall patterns, demonstrating why it is important for them to understand the multiple aspects of the “human farm”. They also show why it is important to understand that the “human farm” does not emerge and operate exclusively through the activities of an individual. Rather, it involves the family, which is a part of communities of neighbouring human farms. These, in turn, seamlessly interact in networks of other activities around food. Thus, learning in agriculture is very much a collective enterprise, and as such, effective partnering in people-centred development requires special attention to the social aspects of agriculture.

**Social transformation** The tradition of “participation” in development is rooted in the tradition of non-formal, popular education and life-long learning pioneered by Nikolaj Grundtvig, founder of the Danish Folk Schools in the 19th century. This groundbreaking work influenced similar rural peoples’ movements throughout Europe. A century later it directly inspired activity across the world, such as that supported by James Yen’s Mass Education Movement in China, Paulo Freire’s adult literacy programmes in Brazil, Myles Horton’s Highlander Folk Education Center in Appalachia in the United States, and countless other examples.

Such examples show that if well managed, and if planned as part of a democratic spirit that respects local tradition and the right to self-determination, partnering can help people break through their pre-conceived notions of what is possible. Beyond mere participation in learning activities, local control over the learning agenda is central to democratic change. This means that an external facilitator must be continually aware of his or her own role in the community.

**Partnering for learning** As a first step towards assuring democratic facilitation, a practitioner needs to carefully manage how he or she goes about promoting change. In particular, locally led learning processes need to:

- help individuals in understanding themselves as learners (through open discussion of learning styles

and processes of critical reflection);

- encourage individuals to expand their learning experiences and styles (overcoming barriers and exploring new strategies);
- employ a variety of instructional approaches (so that participants experience different ways of interacting and learning);
- create an environment in which tolerance and diversity can thrive; and
- create a climate in which collaboration exists (where participants work with one another as resources).



**Effective learning involves practise in context, open debat and discussions - like in this course on alternative ploughs in Potosi, Bolivia.**

Admittedly, arriving to a community with a partnership in mind and a learning agenda in your pocket can be problematic. For an outsider, effective partnering for development begins first and foremost with reflective practice and honesty. This means understanding and being up-front with one’s own worldview, biases, agenda and motivations for seeking a partnership for change. It then involves the capacity to work shoulder-to-shoulder with others – both as individuals and in collectives – to mobilise their single most valuable resource for continuity and change: people.

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