

Islands in the ocean: the institutional deficiency of ecoregional programmes

Bart de Steenhuijsen Piters, Hugo Verkuijl, Margo Kooijman, Willem Heemskerk
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Summary

The contribution of ecoregional programmes to more effective organisation of agricultural research in sub-Saharan Africa is disappointing. They seem to compete with the National Agricultural Research Systems, rather than being complementary. They have created temporarily niches, well endowed with financially and technical support, not always respecting strategies and procedures of national and local research centres. Ecoregional programmes could make a more effective contribution to development oriented research by focussing more explicitly on the institutional support to national and local centres. The change from the current research focused approach to the facilitation and strengthening of institutional processes is an enormous challenge, in which the experiences gained by KIT in Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Benin, Mali and Mozambique could provide assistance.

Introduction

During the Global Forum on Agricultural Research meeting in Dresden (May, 2000) some major opportunities for agricultural research and development were identified, new partnerships could be forged for research due to reduction in public funding, globalisation and trade liberalisation, and scientific advances (e.g. ICT and biotechnology). The major international agricultural research and development partners agreed in the Dresden declaration to commit themselves to adhering to the following principles:

- Research programmes should be subsidiary and complementary to the on-going work
- Agricultural research should be demand-driven
- Research priority setting should take a holistic view based on farmer's perspectives.

- Research programmes should involve stakeholders and particularly the ultimate beneficiaries

The role of the ecoregional¹ programmes in relation to the National Agricultural Research Systems and the Sub-National or Local Agricultural Research Systems should be seen in the context of the referred commitment.

Ecoregional programmes are the result of the decentralisation of CGIAR research programmes to ecoregional units in order to link closer to national agricultural research systems in the corresponding ecoregions. National Agricultural Research programmes are at the same time decentralised through de-concentration, delegation and even privatisation of their services, in particular their adaptive research programmes.

The issue of organisational and institutional aspects of ecoregional programmes in relation to the NARS should have been discussed already a decade ago. It has to be concluded that the relations between ecoregional programmes and Local Agricultural Research Systems are not necessarily better than past links between CGIAR institutes and NARS. Based on the simple philosophy that it is never too late to change, we would like to challenge the ecoregional programmes and propose some fundamental adjustments in the way they collaborate with NARS. Before doing so, we will provoke a debate on the issues by presenting our observations on regional collaborations that we, as KIT staff, have witnessed in various countries. Our observations are derived from Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia, Benin, Mali and Mozambique, countries where we facilitate institutional development in NARS since the Eighties. Our presentation is therefore restricted to sub-Saharan Africa and does not take into account ecoregional programmes in Latin America and Asia.

The ecoregional programme approach and its impact on NARS

The stated goals, objectives and approach of the ecoregional programmes such as more location specific research, improved partnership, to carry out research in natural resource management and increased productivity of farming systems seem to be a *contradictio in terminis*. In our views, the contribution ecoregional programmes have made to more effective

¹ The term Regional will be used for the international context and Local for the Sub-National research programmes (i.e. Zonal, Provincial/Regional).

organisation of agricultural research in sub-Saharan Africa is disappointing. The major problem of these programmes in institution building of NARS is that they seem to compete with the NARS as principal actors, rather than being complementary, reducing them from objects (institutional development and partnership) to subjects (to conduct research within the ecoregional agenda).

The following observations support this conclusion:

Financial and technical means

In the four countries mentioned above, ecoregional programmes have more or less penetrated the NARS, creating temporarily niches for agricultural research of commendable standards. These local components of the ecoprogrammes are facilitated by financial and technical support that is often virtually absent to researchers who do not belong to the restricted in-crowd. This results in a contrast that emphasises the difference between the ecoregional niche and its institutional environment.

Human resources

The modalities of national research can not compete with those of the ecoregional programmes. This results in local concentration of competent researchers in the latter, reducing the research capacity of the national and local centres for other priorities and locations. Directors of these centres, but also stakeholders in other areas that are not ecoregional priorities, perceive this concentration of capacity and resources as a 'brain-drain' and unfair competition.

Decision making

Decision making about the allocation of resources for research is centralised and takes place outside the national agricultural research centres. The research carried out has to meet the ecoregional programme conditions and agenda, which are not necessarily those of the national and local centres. In this way, the active and prominent role of the latter is reduced instead of reinforced.

Co-ordination

In a number of cases no inventory of on-going research is carried out and duplication of research efforts takes place. New diagnostic studies and priority setting activities take place

outside the programming of the centre. On-going interventions on the same topics (i.e. gender analysis, soil fertility management) became obsolete as they receive no attention from the better equipped and therefore more influential ecoregional programmes. Sometimes even new and exclusive agro-ecological zoning takes place, useful to the ecoregional programme, but confusing to local research and extension systems that try to work with harmonised zonation. In short, local research strategies and institutional procedures, like zonation, decision making, farmer representation etc. are not always respected.

Transfer of results

Local stakeholder involvement in the execution of the ecoregional programmes is often well developed, but remains too local and non-institutionalised to allow for wider adoption of the innovations that are generated. This results in a marginal impact of the programmes on agricultural productivity and sustainability at a more macro-economic level. In the four countries mentioned, linkages between farmers and researchers may have been relatively strong, but those with rural development agents, amongst which the national extension service, are weak within the areas of intervention and absent beyond these areas.

Financial control

Finally, resources made available by the ecoregional programmes are not efficiently used due to lack of local control. Over-budgeting and only partly implementation of activities, but maximum charging were often observed. This inefficient use is a direct result from the lack of institutional ownership and centralised management of the (financial) resources available.

The challenge: institutionalisation of the ecoregional programmes

Ecoregional programmes can make a more effective contribution to development oriented research by focussing more explicitly on the institutional support to national and sub-national centres. To achieve this, ecoregional programmes must reconsider their role and approach fundamentally. KIT has been engaged in the facilitation of processes of institutional development of agricultural research centres in a range of countries. Results from the various institutional approaches applied are generally considered as promising, though it may be too premature to draw sound conclusions on their impact on rural development. However, when ecoregional programmes accept the 'institutional challenge', then the following suggestions should be carefully considered.

- **Process oriented approach**

From our experience we conclude that there is no 'blue-print' for the institutional development of NARS and LARS. Each centre has its own rationale, composition and operates within a specific social, economic and biophysical environment. Moreover, the stage and extent of institutional development of each centre differs. As it was concluded in Tanzania after a comprehensive assessment: "all centres are client-oriented to some extent, but none to the same extent". This implies that a process-oriented approach must be applied that takes into account the specific objectives, resources and environment of each research centre.

- **Inspire to change**

Institutional development of the NARS and LARS can only be achieved when actors involved are committed to change. Ecoregional programmes should carefully assess if this prerequisite of commitment to change is satisfied at all levels of decision making. KIT has been involved in processes of change where its role is mainly to inspire management and researchers to change their institutional culture, to allow for a more client oriented and outward looking approach. Ecoregional programmes could play the same role, by allowing and stimulating changes of the organisation, rather than bypassing difficulties.

- **Focus on local research systems**

Local Agricultural Research Centres (LARC) and, if relevant, other research organisations must be considered as the focal point for the ecoregional programmes. The latter should avoid competition, enhance compatibility, while redefining their role as facilitators of locally desired processes of change. This has various implications, such as:

- Local Agricultural Research Centres must be considered as entities that are composed of several units (for example: management, administration, accountancy, research, research support services) which are inter-related and all need specific support to strengthen the weaker units in research centres. Institutional investments may include: provision of business and management training, introduction of comprehensive accountancy facilities (computers and software), and introduction of revolving funds

to rehabilitate support services. (It is striking that a comparable holistic approach was used for research since the Seventies in the farming systems approach and is only now applied to the agricultural research system itself).

- Resources must be made available directly to the LARC and NARC and their decision making should be accepted as autonomous. This does not imply that the ecoregional programmes should not define conditions for the use of their resources. However, these conditions are of a different nature than before and may include: active stakeholder involvement in resource allocation, as well as the monitoring and evaluation of their use, formulation of modalities of funding and rewarding of output, transparent accountancy of programme finances, and effective human resource development by training, employment and deployment of staff. Centres need a local research policy to guarantee that the conditions for institutional development are fulfilled.
- A well-developed network of local stakeholders may be considered as one of the most valuable assets of a LARC. Ecoregional programmes may consider favouring centres that have established such networks, or provide support to Centres to facilitate their establishment.
- Competitive Technology Development Funds (research grant systems), managed by a representation of a diversity of stakeholders can be established to further enhance stakeholder involvement in research planning. Accordingly, (financial) interests are disentangled and resource allocation separated from resource use, while monitoring and evaluation becomes more transparent and effective, and rewarding can become a function of the quality of output. Moreover, competitive research funds may consider to favour less-endowed farmers and their representing organisations, while commercial farmers or enterprises can contract and fund from their own resources the required research services.

Conclusions

These are only a few suggestions that the ecoregional programmes can consider in order to enhance their institutional support to NARS. A change from the research focused approach to the facilitation and strengthening of institutional processes must be considered as the major challenge of the ecoregional programmes. In our view, the creation of small paradise islands in a vast ocean, though they may be attractive in the short run, does not sufficiently contribute

to the satisfaction of needs for research support by agrarian stakeholders in the long run. KIT has gained experience in institutional development in the countries mentioned. Based on this experience we hope to contribute to the strengthening of the institutional development approach of the ecoregional programmes. Together, we can face the challenge and provide our partners in the South with the professional support that they need since long. It is due time that we change our attitude towards partnership and subject our priorities to those who should be in charge.