

Lessons Learned

**ABSTRACT**

While non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been lauded for their ability to respond quickly to crisis and to work with a variety of actors to address problems in a catalytic and coordinated manner, they have also been criticized for their lack of technical capacity and the limited sustainability and short term nature of their actions. The NGO mandate differs significantly from the mandate of national programs or their counterpart international research centers. This multi-sectoral orientation of NGOs is driven by short term project funding and oblique program mandates. Where research excellence is at the pinnacle for national and international research centers, partnership is what drives NGO success. This paper briefly discusses the role of NGOs in agricultural interventions and highlight some of the key lessons learned from Catholic Relief Services experience managing a multi-country banana (*Musa spp.*) project in Central and East Africa; specifically related to fostering effective networks and partnerships, administering and managing multiple partners, working with research to address problems at scale in a timely and cost effective manner; and drawing some conclusions applicable to other agricultural interventions marked by multiple partners and a commitment to achieve scale and impact.

**INTRODUCTION**

The Crop Crisis Control Project (C3P) was a two year initiative in six countries of the Great Lakes Region of Africa to respond to *Xanthomonas* wilt in banana (*Musa spp.*) and to mosaic disease in cassava (*Manihot esculenta*). Funded by The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), managed by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), technically backstopped at regional level by Bioversity International and the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) and national research programs at country level, the project brought together more than 40 implementing partners, 33 of which were NGO's. The total C3P project value was \$5.1 million, of which \$4.7 million was from USAID and \$385,000 was a cash cost share from CRS. Approximately \$1.8 million was administered by 40 partners who submitted projects through a country level coordination committee which vetted projects and sent to a regional panel for review before funds were released by CRS Country offices to the partner. An additional \$1 million was earmarked for Bioversity International and IITA. Given a premium placed on geographical scale, the importance of having an embedded pre-existing network of field offices and

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partners throughout the project area, CRS was a natural choice to serve as the lead NGO for C3P. CRS is the official relief and development agency of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, operates in over 80 countries, and has a global annual budget of over \$500 million.

Banana Xanthomonas wilt (BXW) and cassava mosaic disease (CMD) are the two largest natural threats to food security in the Great Lakes Region since 2000. Both diseases are responsible for significant loss in production to banana and cassava crops, which combined represent over 50% of all kilocalorie intake across the Great Lakes Region (Abele and Twine, 2008). BXW is caused by *Xanthomonas campestris* pv. *musacearum*. While first observed on a close relative of banana, *Ensete* (*Ensete ventricosum*), 90 years ago in Ethiopia, it was first reported as affecting banana in Ethiopia in 1994. The pandemic currently spreading in East and Central Africa was first seen in Central Uganda in 2001 and has since spread to DR Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Kenya. BXW causes early ripening and rotting of fruit with rapid wilting and eventual death of plants. Suckers produced from infected mats are severely diseased and wilt before producing bunches. All banana varieties are affected by the disease with no cure once BXW infects a plant.

Disease transmission occurs through insects, tools, and soil. Insects appear the most efficient natural pathway, by nectar or pollen feeding insects. Farmers are therefore advised to remove the male flower immediately after the last cluster of fruits have formed. Removing the male flower ('debudding') ensures there is no nectar or pollen to attract insects, preventing insect transmission of BXW. Contaminated tools are the most common human transmission pathway of BXW, especially under intensively managed banana farms where farmers regularly remove excess suckers, dry fiber, and green leaves. While the risk of disease spread can be greatly reduced by sterilizing tools via exposing the tool blade to fire or disinfecting with bleach before moving tools to the next mat, this is highly challenging to execute. Another important source of BXW infection is through the use of suckers from previously infected fields as the pathogen can survive in the soil for over three months. Given the concerns over spread from soil and tools, farmers are advised to isolate and uproot all BXW infected plants but this is problematic due to labor needs associated with uprooting and a small scale farmer mentality of trying to maximize short term returns from fields as opposed to the larger 'public good' of immediately destroying an infected plant. Compounding the challenges of early detection and plant removal is the major difficulty to visually diagnosis BXW among multiple pathogens at field level (Mwangi, 2008).

Cassava mosaic disease and associated activities accounted for over 65% of the C3P program but because this paper is based on a presentation to banana researchers and practitioners the contextual focus is on BXW. Effectively responding to BXW involves a heavy focus on public awareness, national and local level policy coordination, and working closely with farming communities towards rapid disease diagnose and collective action. At the time of the C3P, only limited research done on the epidemiology of BXW had been undertaken. While the main vectors were known, efficiency of transmission was not well understood.

## **RISE OF THE NGO**

NGOs, working in agricultural in East and Central Africa, have grown exponentially, both in number and influence, over the past 30 years. Between the mid 1970s and early 1990s, registered NGOs in Kenya increased four-fold, while their proportion of total donor aid rose to nearly 50%. This trend is not unique to Kenya and has been attributed to the poor performance of large centrally managed development activities and the limitations in scale and objectivity of government actors. Critically, the rapid rise in oil prices in the 1970s, combined with declining commodity prices through the 1970s and 1980s, reduced the ability of African governments to finance state extension and research and increased their reliance on foreign donors. The shift in aid managed by NGOs also came in the context of structural adjustment and a push to reduce the role of the state as well as an emerging democratization and good governance movement from Western donors.

## **PUBLIC SECTOR AND RESEARCH CHALLENGES**

Public sector approaches to technology development and adoption have been generally embedded in elaborate formal structures, where adaptability and responsiveness were discouraged and where extension services were expected to translate scientific knowledge claims into producer practices. In a public goods environment, agricultural research is pushed to ask and answer questions at some degree of generality in order to justify funding and scientific effort, hence there is a natural tendency for research to slide towards addressing 'pure' as opposed to 'applied' problems (Shrum, 2003). Linking research outputs to behavioral change among farmers is a monumental challenge under the most favorable circumstances where readily applicable technologies are available and where the extension services are well supported. Even under a best-case scenario, an effective extension agent must

have a high understanding of the research product, the extent of applicability of the product to the targeted zone of intervention, and have astute social skills. In the best of state supported extension in Africa, the ratio of extension agent to farmer is always over 1 to 1,000 and most research outputs are neither readily available nor contextually applicable (Agbamu, 2000). Public sector approaches to agricultural technology development and delivery are not adequate to deal with a wide range of socio-economic and agro-ecological conditions which create the complex, diverse, and risk prone areas where the rural poor reside. Faced with the challenging and variable conditions of the rural poor, participation and full engagement of farmers is crucial to ensure that local knowledge is fully brought to the fore to meet local opportunities, challenges, and aspirations (Chambers, 1989).

## **NGO COMPLEMENTARITY**

As a consequence of the often embedded nature of how they operate in communities and the sense of accountability that such presence fosters, NGOs are complementary to more conventional public sector modes of agricultural. Service development and provision may aptly describe most NGOs but it would be an oversight to focus only on the easily measurable deliverables in highlighting the value of NGOs. Operating where governments tend to be autocratic, where civic organizations and civil society have a limited sphere of influence, and where ultimately the small holder may have little voice on strategic research and policy decisions pertaining to agriculture, the advocacy and community empowerment efforts of NGOs are likely to have positive spill-over effect in terms of generating institutional pluralism and building democratic processes. NGOs greatest long term contribution to the development and delivery of technology to African farmers is, likely, to be through advocacy at local and national level, related to promoting policy and research to benefit specific sub-groups of a population or, more immediately and directly, through affecting the strategy through which funds are allocated or projects designed (Clark, 1991).

## **LEVERAGING NGO'S FOR SCALE AND IMPACT: C3P LESSONS LEARNED**

### **What is an NGO?**

The acronym tells us very little besides what it is not – not governmental. This means that the NGO can be a church group, a village association, a small community based organization, a lobby group that does advocacy work, a national apex organization of farmer groups, a national non-profit organization, a large multi-sector relief and development organization, or any combination of these. Diversity is a key attribute. Agricultural practitioners looking to establish working relationship with NGOs are encouraged to consider key factors to better characterize and classify the NGO: profit or value driven, non-member or member based, operationally oriented to research and innovation or action and implementation, management

approach enlightened top-down, functionally participatory, or comprehensively power-sharing, community based or supra community servicing (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993).

In C3P, the donor made an initial conscious decision to have a large multi-sectoral, and locally embedded, NGO to manage and lead the execution of the project, but with the caveat that research was to be built in from the beginning at both national and regional levels. The belief behind this decision was that the only way to achieve meaningful and timely scale was to ensure that there were strong links between the research community and a pre-existing and well established network directly linked to farming communities across all six of the target countries. By focusing primarily on the field network and secondarily on research, the donor made an explicit acknowledgement that research was secondary and placed a special emphasis on 'deliverables', which at times placed the C3P research entities in the uncomfortable position of recommending best practices to the NGO network without having all the research data to scientifically support these recommendations. Similarly the NGO, CRS at national and regional level, was put in a rather unique position of having a significant coordination role in matters where they had very little previous experience.

Among the 40 C3P sub-grantees, 33 were local NGOs of 19 were multi-sectoral with a confessional identity (Catholic or Protestant), 11 were agriculturally focused, nine were sub-grants to national research institutes, and one belonged to a local university. All subgrantees were selected because they either had a technical capacity or they were a respected NGO operating in an area severely impacted by either BXW or CMD.

### **The NGO Mandate**

At the most rudimentary level, NGOs can be distinguished between those more driven to develop and deliver outputs directly or indirectly and those more concerned with process and advocacy. While many NGOs are a combination of 'outputs and process',

more technically oriented NGOs have a focus on the development and delivery of outputs where NGOs with a focus on 'process and advocacy' tend to be multi-sectoral. Agricultural practitioners should look for complementarity and synergy. Interventions characterized by the need to develop and apply new knowledge should promote relationships between research and NGOs that are more focused on process. Agricultural interventions characterized by the need to intensify the delivery of existing technology may require more technically competent NGOs. Scale and timing of the intervention are also determinants.

In C3P, there was strong synergy between research and development practitioners and a positive combination of process and technically oriented NGOs among the 28 community based organizations working on CMD activities and the 12 that worked on BXW related activities. However, the synergy was not without conflict. Positive and constructive tension resulted from requests made to researchers, which could only be provided by relying on heuristics as much as on sound science. Farmer friendly field based guidance on disease transmission was difficult to scientifically support due to the limited epidemiological data on BXW. This underscored a fundamental challenge between development and research practitioners, encouraging research partners to think about 'utility and responding to immediate needs', while encouraging development practitioners to 'consider longer term considerations and interventions based on sound science'. Despite the best intentions of donors and NGOs, cultural knowledge and practice frequently lacks relevance and applicability to the planning and operationalization of projects (Shepherd, 2005).

The relatively short time frame of C3P oriented the project to input indicators and less to process, output, or impact indicators. A focus on how the various communities identified or perceived the threat of BXW was not at all part of the project. The basic assumption underlining the BXW activities in C3P – and perhaps undermining the project's longer term impact and sustainability – was that lessons learned from the Uganda experience of managing

BXW could be applied to other countries. In this respect, C3P fell squarely in the camp of positivist understandings of knowledge, with an emphasis on technology transfer, and the attendant notion that the problem at hand was understood in an objective manner. There were multiple meetings with farmers and farming communities affected by BXW in order to raise awareness of BXW and share the experience from elsewhere, but less to understand and carefully appreciate how local knowledge and capacity could be utilized to respond to BXW in a meaningful and locally owned and managed fashion (Milofsky et al., 2007).

C3P was able to directly reach more than 56,000 farmers across six countries with BXW sensitization campaigns and the development of publicity materials with a focus to raise awareness of the disease, practice male bud removal as a primary control measure, and clear diseased plants and clean tools. C3P also developed clean planting material through the introduction of community based macro-propagators and mother gardens, which during the life of the project served over 3,000 farmers with clean banana planting material (Eden-Green et al., 2008). With a total estimated outlay for banana expenditure of \$1.5 million under C3P, the cost per direct program participant approached \$26 (Walsh, 2008).

### **NGO and Partnership**

'If they give me money, they are my donor. If I give them money, then I am their partner'. The dialectic on partnership is very much determined on who is doing the talking. Is it the entity that is primarily advocating and holding the money or is it the entity that is primarily executing activities at the field level? Successful partnership has been defined as mutual trust, complementarity, reciprocal accountability, equity in resource allocation and effort, shared perceptions, mutual advocacy, and long term commitment to working together. Yet, there is usually a sharp disconnect between the rhetoric and reality when there is unequal access to knowledge or money.

While there has been substantial research on determining the power relations and processes between, and within, organizations and individuals, there has been less attention to the role of individuals as the agents which drive relations within organizations. At an organizational level, partnership is considered to be executed through the structures of the partner organizations and specific individuals or agents are considered to act out of the best interest of partner organizations. Yet, inter-organizational relationships are often initiated at a personal level and are successfully maintained through development into institutional linkages, which foster an environment conducive to such continued 'personal linkages'. Partnerships may be signed off on by organizational leaders, but they are managed by individuals and vulnerable to change arising from individuals (Lister, 1997). The semantics of partnership is often obtuse and theoretical, a language appropriate for a discourse between organizations but less so for individuals. To encourage and promote individual action in terms of fostering partnership, the entire dialogue on NGO partnership needs to include more orientation on the role and importance of individuals in driving the development of partnerships.

In the C3P project, partnership had many working definitions but all were related to how over 50 different organizations were networked within the project. C3P created a number of new operational relationships, notably with two international research centers, Bioversity International and IITA, as well as with cassava and banana programs in all six countries, and also with about a dozen NGOs with whom CRS had no previous experience. The multitude of new partnerships presented many challenges administratively, financially, and programmatically. For the purpose of this discussion, specific focus is placed on institutionalizing relationships between organizations and the importance of acknowledging the role of the individual in fostering partnerships.

CRS has developed a significant body of training material and literature for staff and partners on the theme of partnership. In CRS, partnership serves not only as a platform for

conducting business but rather working alongside institutions at multiple levels to collaborate, cooperate, assist, and ultimately to support the needy. CRS has developed a series of partnership principles and regularly conducts partnership reflection meetings to reflect on the nature of its partnerships to understand how they can be strengthened. The material and approaches developed and used by CRS on partnership have a strong orientation to capacity building and institutional strengthening and focus almost exclusively on organizational processes as the basis for change.

In C3P, challenges on partnership centered on relationships of key staff with regional and country level partners. Given the short term nature of the project, staff was hired specifically for the project and had difficulty, at times, understanding and adhering to the CRS approach to partnership. Among the eight staff employed full time by CRS on C3P, just two had previously worked with CRS. Fortunately, CRS strong field presence in terms of staff and offices in the C3P countries provided good support.

Given the importance of institutionalizing relationships between organizations and a tendency for high staff turn-over within the NGO and research community, it is important to consider the value of more systematic 'partnership reflections' between organizations, partnership training and orientation for newly hired staff, and the value of promoting exchanges and visits between key staff within organizations as a means of quickly deepening organizational relationships to help them become less impervious to the changes brought about from staff movement.

### **NGO and Research Management and Accountability**

Who is the NGO and research entity accountable to and how are they accountable? There are important questions to consider when entering into a formal working relationship, particularly for organizations with different implementing mandates and approaches. The extent of accountability and the rigor of financial and management systems may be highly variable, which needs to be understood by all parties before launching into a relationship.

In C3P, a major challenge related to centrally managing a sub-granting mechanism and the accountability and management of multiple grantees. Initially, CRS implemented a simple but standardized competitive small granting mechanism supported peer review. However, while this proved enormously supportive in building a common understanding across six countries of how different organizations conceived, approached, planned, and budgeted to execute project activities, it proved to be too time consuming for the two regional C3P staff. Despite CRS having well established sub-granting mechanisms in place, the high volume of sub-grantees presented challenges in some countries as the number of C3P sub-grantees approached the total number of sub-grantees for the entire country program. Fortunately, with more than ten distinct field offices across the six countries of C3P, CRS had staff and systems in place and on the ground and able to provide backstopping in terms of grant management.

Coordination was a primary means by which C3P promoted a catalytic response to both BXW and CMD. Coordination occurred through national level steering committees, which were conducted under the authority of the Ministry of Agriculture, while CRS served as the secretariat, organizing meetings and issuing minutes. Coordination was concerned with sharing information with a focus on understanding the interventions of different actors as it related to BXW and CMD.

C3P reached well over 77,000 farmers directly with improved disease tolerant cassava planting material during the life of the project (Eden-Green et al., 2008). With a total estimated outlay for cassava expenditure of \$3.6 million under C3P, the cost per direct program participant approached \$45 (Walsh, 2008).

## CONCLUSION

NGO's bring a set of aptitudes to agricultural interventions that differ from either public sector or research organizations and the rise of the NGO as a force in agricultural in developing countries should be seen less as predatory behaviour by external agents and more as a natural outcome of the inherent challenges faced by public sector and research organizations. Due to the wide mandate of NGOs, their core competencies are varied, and hence, it is important to match the needs of the agricultural intervention to the NGO mandate and capacity to maximize synergy with the public sector and research.

When considering scale and impact, it is important to focus on improving community access to technology and in considering the mean by which local knowledge and ideas can be leveraged to promote appropriate adoption of technology. Given the tendency for staff movement, integrating several people to be responsible individuals for operational aspect of a relationship should help increase the rate at which a relationship between two organizations becomes institutionalized.

Responding effectively at scale requires particular consideration to 'place' and a greater orientation to adapt knowledge to different contexts. More systematic and structured processes, backstopped by development anthropologists, may be necessary if development practitioners and research community are serious in engaging with communities in ways which validate and optimise local knowledge and capacity.

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