Lessons learned about collaborative action research from the JOLISAA project

Jolanda van den Berg, on behalf of JOLISAA research staff and all the people who have collaborated with JOLISAA

Background
The EU funded multi-partner project Joint Learning about Innovation Systems in African Agriculture (JOLISAA), which operated in 2010-2013, opted for a collaborative research approach. The project intended to create a learning environment, in which researchers and innovation stakeholders were stimulated to learn together about recent and ongoing innovation processes in Benin, Kenya and South Africa (Figure 1).

Objective
• This study within JOLISAA meant to:
  • To critically reflect upon the JOLISAA joint learning approach;
  • To get insight in the actual roles/tasks that researchers and stakeholders fulfilled; and
  • To identify strong and weak points of the JOLISAA learning approach, in creating social capital for local innovation.

Methods
To generate in-depth knowledge on the experiences of the JOLISAA researchers in the learning process, national teams were reflecting on their experiences through individual and group interviews. Additional interviews were held with team members, research collaborators and stakeholders from selected innovation cases assessed by JOLISAA. Timelines were constructed during these interviews according to perceived critical moments for learning together, and served to reflect on individual learning expectations, roles and tasks, learning practice and challenges experienced.

Results
One approach, different learning aims in practice
• The country team in Benin aimed at creating a supportive national institutional and policy environment to enhance local innovations.
• The country team in Kenya team aimed at building national researchers’ capacities in innovation-oriented approaches.
• The country team in South Africa aimed at integrating different types of knowledge to formulate credible policy recommendations.

Researchers in the driving seat
• Researchers took the initiative, designed, planned and controlled the entire collaborative research process.
• The stakeholder participation in practice aimed to cross-check and to enrich the research findings.
• The researchers did not actively involve stakeholders in the analysis of research results.

Challenges encountered
• Diverging views between research partners about what joint learning is about, and what it should achieve.
• Limited joint (field) research by the research partners and stakeholders to arrive at shared concepts, research- and learning methods.
• Limited time and financial resources available for:
  - Researcher-stakeholder interactions around individual innovation and learning processes.
  - North-South and South-South interactions.

Weak and strong points
• JOLISAA researchers were strong in doing participatory research and organized consultation meetings around individual innovation processes and national multi-stakeholder workshops.
• However they did not carry out learning activities to improve local innovation processes in practice as this was not actively supported by the project, which emphasized content-wise (‘single loop’) learning, rather than reflexive action learning.

Conclusion
• JOLISAA researchers were focused on content-wise learning, rather than organizing more intensive stakeholder interactions with the aim to jointly reflect on ways to enhancing local innovation in practice together with societal stakeholders.
• The challenge for future collaborative action research is to find ways to more effectively combine participatory research activities with reflexive action learning and capacity building that include non-researchers.

References

On behalf of
Conny Almekinders, Bernard Bridier, Collatseh Chitsika, Todd Crane, Anne Floquet, Rose Fagbemissi, Bette Harms, Henri Hocdé, Geoffrey Kamau, Brigid Letty, Arno Maatman, Roch Mongbo, Teresia Ng’ang’a, Hlami Ngwenya, Nicolene Oudwater, Gerrit Rostman, Neur-Eïdaine Selamna, Joe Stevens, Rigobert Tissou, Bernard Triomphe, Simplice Davo Vodouhe, Ann Waters-Bayer and all the people who collaborated with JOLISAA.