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Recommendations from the DESIRE project

DESIRE: lessons learned on science-NGO collaboration in research projects

It is often said that scientists work in an ivory tower, not able to share their research with the rest of the (non-scientific) world. This is especially so with the natural sciences, whose research topics are technical, specific and difficult to understand. However, in order to convince those who determine land use and design agricultural policies the latest cutting-edge research on these topics is needed; if only to support the 35% of the world population living in drylands facing the problems of land degradation, hunger and poverty.

Pictures by Both ENDS, Madrid UNCCD COP8 2007 and Niger, 2011.

Between 2007 and 2012, the DESIRE project selected, tested and modelled promising alternative land use and management strategies to mitigate and remediate desertification and erosion in sixteen dryland hotspots around the world, to quantify their effectiveness at various scales. Research in the hotspots was based on a close collaboration between scientists and local stakeholders, such as farmers, to ensure the acceptability and feasibility of the chosen strategies. The scientific results were translated to lessons learned and recommendations for good agricultural practices and environmental management for a non-scientific audience as well. These were disseminated to practitioners, agricultural extensionists, governmental authorities, policy makers, NGOs, land users, land owners, and local communities. During the five-year project, two Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) were involved in the project to advice the scientific project partners on outreach towards policy makers and other non-scientific stakeholders.

Joint field visit in the DESIRE project in Spain. By Alterra, 2011.

A lot of valuable lessons can be learned from this rich collaboration, for future partnerships between researchers and NGOs, and for research projects with an aim to contribute to societal debates related to land use issues in drylands. In order to draw these lessons, we characterize both scientists and NGOs. This way, potential differences, problems and advantages can surface more easily.

Although NGOs and scientists not only have different working methods, but often also different reasons for being involved in research projects in the first place, these differences can enrich learning and knowledge exchange by introducing different perspectives and challenging old ideas. Being aware of differences right from the start and making agreements on specific roles and responsibilities helps to manage everyone's expectations during the implementation of a shared project. Scientists are held accountable for their publications in scientific journals. On the other hand, NGOs are often focused on social change and are far more politicized by nature. Scientists may have difficulties in identifying which research results are pertinent for decision-makers. NGOs tend to use research outputs to target policy makers at crucial moments and do not always want to wait for consensus among the scientific community. NGOs might even present facts that have not yet been verified, just for the benefit of starting up a discussion, which scientists will generally avoid doing at all costs.

Why collaborate?

Despite their differences in approach and methodology, there are nevertheless numerous reasons for scientists and NGOs to join hands in collaborative projects. Participation in joint research projects can helps scientists better define their research questions. NGOs working in an area for a long time have an overview of the relevant stakeholders, and can complete the picture in the study site by adding the reality of the field to the scientific model or system. They know the range of stakes in the area, and are able to give an integrated picture of all the factors influencing decision-making on land management issues. This saves the scientist the effort of having to find this all out during the research, and gives him/her a head start. At the end of the research the NGOs will remain in the area and can ensure that research results continue to be used. Politicians change too often to follow long-term scientific research, but NGOs can ensure constant updates are provided to new politicians. Researchers are consulted by policy makers for fact-based, objective advice. NGOs can provide insights on the social context which may prove useful to complement the facts.

NGOs presenting ideas at UNCCD CRIC9 conference. By CARI, 2011.

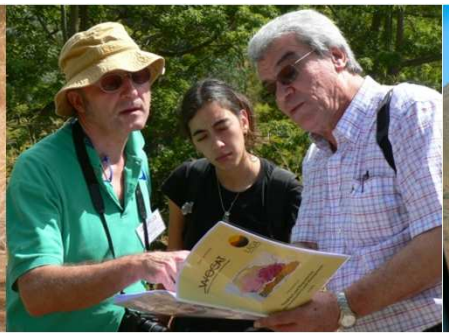
For research purposes, scientists generally prefer to avoid having to deal with politics and having to keep themselves constantly informed about policy developments. By working with NGOs, scientists can feed their scientific results into on-going dialogues with decision makers without having to engage themselves. Although scientists often think they need to retain their independent position by remaining politically neutral, their research results can be used for a variety of political purposes once published. An open debate with NGOs about the current political debates, and the possible use or misuse of scientific material would prevent a situation where scientific results are misused or remain covered up when they would not fit the mainstream policy view.

Joint field visit in the DESIRE project in Spain. By Both ENDS, 2011.

The assumption that science is politically neutral leads to a situation of non-engagement, whereas real change is only possible when scientific results are dispersed carefully and according to a well-planned strategy. DESIRE has taken a courageous and progressive step by involving NGOs throughout the project, encouraging all project partners to plan outreach to policy makers together. During the various project stages scientists were challenged to formulate and present their results in ways to make it relevant for policy makers, and to think about policy scenarios beyond the mere technocratic interventions; an exercise that sometimes proved difficult. Both scientists and NGOs have learned from this collaboration.

For instance, in order for NGOs to be taken seriously by policy makers and the international community, NGOs need to formalize their concerns and views. One way of doing this is by getting issues addressed in scientific fact-based, high quality publications. NGOs can learn from the sound evidence scientists use to build arguments and statements. NGOs are frequently unaware of the latest scientific publications which could otherwise be of great value to them, and working with scientists allows NGOs to have better access to scientific information. When NGOs get to co-define the research question(s), they can even ensure that the research deals with current affairs and political debates the NGO is involved in. Often, NGO statements based on scientific research raise their reliability. Scientific knowledge is typically understood to be explicit, systematised, decontextualized and hence widely transferable. This is sometimes referred to as “know-why”, since scientific knowledge partly attempts to understand the underlying principles and theory behind observable phenomena (against “know-how” coming from local practitioners and experience).

Farmer in Niger. By Both ENDS, 2011.



DESIRE joint field visit in Cape Verde. By CARI, 2008.

Setting up the joint project

DESIRE field visit in Spain. By Both ENDS, 2011.

Scientists get credit and recognition by publishing in English language scientific journals, because of how the scientific system is currently organised. Any work done for society or the common good is not scientifically appreciated and only takes time from scientific publishing, therefore making it more difficult for those who do want to publish for a non-scientific audience for example. Joint research projects that aim to go beyond the scientific publishing, sponsored by donors that encourage such aims, can be a good way to avoid the above problem. Hoverever, there is a great difference between basic research for gaining scientific knowledge and applied research, and the way of organising the work is different as well. Secondly the project needs to accommodate both scientific and NGO partners, which requires a careful setup. From our experience in the DESIRE project, key guidelines we found useful for developing a successful collaborative project are:

Both ENDS and partner NGOs visiting the Dutch embassy in Dakar, Senegal. By CARI, 2009.

- Develop the project goal jointly from the beginning and ensure that deliverables reflect both scientific and non-scientific components. Pay special attention to research questions, expected results and trends in the light of the joint project goal or the policy issue you want to address and make sure they are well connected.
- Depending on the purpose of the project, ensure a sound balance between project partners coming from a science background and from NGOs, and among the different disciplines.
- Ensure that there is budget for both research/science-like activities and NGO activities such as visiting conferences and non-scientific communication. Additionally, ensure that the funds you apply for are able to accommodate both scientific and NGO administrative and organisational set-ups (for example, are both temporary and permanent staff allowed to work on the project).
- Ensure that roles and deliverables are clearly outlined for the project, and that these are regularly reflected on by all team members. Ensure both representatives are present in the management structure of the project – this way strategic choices made and the direction of the project taken during the project lifetime will answer the needs of all project partners.
- Outreach to a non-scientific audience can be done solely by the NGOs, or by all project partners (possibly guided by the NGOs). In case of the latter, make sure all project partners are well aware of this and are comfortable and interested to do so, because it might take extra effort to write for an audience you are not used to. It helps to involve at least some scientists who have experience in reaching out to non-scientific audience.
- Be creative in designing the activities in the project; make use of each others practices and ways of working. For example, the educational systems in science may also be used for outreach to non-scientists as well.

Planning your outreach to policy makers

As an essential part of participatory and policy relevant research, communicating the research results to decision-makers, local land use planners, government agencies and so on, is a delicate matter. Many scientists find it difficult to know to whom and how to present their results, and sometimes consider that their work is done after the research itself. Considerable scientific research that has been undertaken is therefore sleeping in the archives, whereas it could have been very valuable and applicable for many actors. The timing of presenting the project findings to an audience of policy makers is essential, and if possible, plan the project so that the release of the results matches with a favourable policy agenda. Check for example dates of relevant conferences and other policy moments. A few other lessons learned and tips:

- Local level decision-makers and land use planners are sometimes much easier to involve or reach than higher-level ones – so take your message to the right planning level.
- Local level decision-makers are generally more interested in technical transfer, whereas higher-level decision-makers could be more interested in the methodologies and generalities – again, depending on your message chose the right planning level to address.
- Choose your tactic: You can either communicate your results to any policy maker that wants to hear them, or you can start with a policy question and see whether you can answer that question with your results. In the last case your audience will be smaller, but with more interest, than in the first case.
- Beware that your results can get hijacked for a cause you may not want them to be linked to, so think of how you write it – the way scientific results are perceived and constructed will affect the acceptance and use of them.
- Select one or more messages out of your results. Spread and tune your message actively; design something that allows better use of those messages, such as training. Besides publications, think also of other vehicles to bring your message such as field demonstrations. Just publishing your messages on a website will not generate much impact.

Examining stone bunds in farmer fields in Senegal. By CARI, 2009.

Another way of organising a press conference on dryland management in Turkey. By TEMA, 2007.

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- Do you want to give your message to those most interested in your results, or to those most influential on land management issues? You need to adjust your messages and the delivery of them accordingly.
- If you want to address certain policy questions, make sure your research generates the right results (for example, trends are often more relevant than single results, as policy makers need to work with scenarios for the longer term)
- Politicians listen to rapidly changing markets and to voters – a better strategy could be to address the technical personnel working for the politicians. Furthermore, civil servants do not change every 4 years.
- Including social scientists in your research team will help in the outreach to policy makers. Including scientists with experience in addressing policy questions in your team might help even more.
- Make sure you include enough time in the research project at the end to analyse the results, synthesise them, translate them for a non-scientific audience, present them, etc.

Conclusion

Joint science-NGO projects in the field of sustainable land management in drylands are certainly needed and valuable. These kinds of partnerships, including local stakeholders, can make a true difference for land users, land use and sustainable development in drylands. The DESIRE project has developed an approach to do this, and many lessons have been learned that can be of future use for other collaborations of this kind. They have been summed up in this brief.

More information on the DESIRE approach can be found in the book "Desire for greener land - Options for Sustainable Land Management in Drylands" (in press, University of Bern - CDE, Alterra, Wageningen UR and ISRIC – World Soil Information), or on the DESIRE website http://www.desire-his.eu/. More guidance for scientists on reaching out to policy makers can be found in the publication "DESIRE guidelines to writing a policy brief" (January 2011, downloadable from http://www.desire-his.eu, section Research Themes – Facilitating dissemmination.

DESIRE round-table with Spanish policy makers. By Alterra, 2011.

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