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Building partnerships, 15 years of networking to improve food security

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Background

In 1983, a group of concerned donors and scientists met to consider the need for research on bananas and plantains, urged on by the ravages of black Sigatoka disease which were threatening production in an increasing number of countries. They came up with a novel idea. It involved the establishment of an international research network as opposed to the conventional CGIAR research centre, which would focus its efforts on supporting activities conducted by NARS. There would be no central research facility and therefore no major capital outlay and only a limited number of international staff. Research would be done by national institutions, south and north. One of the first priorities was to set up a means for germplasm conservation and distribution.

So INIBAP was conceived. The year 2000 marks its 15th anniversary. At such a time, it is a natural response to assess the effectiveness of this modern *modus operandi* and in doing so to sketch some of the trials and tribulations of networking.

Bananas from improved varieties grown by smallholder farmers in East Africa. Networking put together the supplier of the germplasm, the multiplier of the plants and the distributor to farmers.
(Tine Hemelings, KCDP)



Networking creates opportunities

Operating by commissioning or outsourcing research gives a networking organization the freedom to call on the most appropriate and experienced research teams to address strategic problems. The independence from a structured research programme, also, is liberating in that initiatives may be focussed at all levels, from frontline science to farmer,

Linking with regional networks

INIBAP works with four regional NARS-based networks, which each come under the auspices of regional umbrella agricultural organizations. The focus within each region is quite unique. For instance, in Latin America many hundreds of technicians and farmers are being trained in a technical package to improve plantain production, in East and South Africa IPM options are under evaluation by smallholder farmers, in West and Central Africa an attempt is being made to improve peri-urban banana production, finally, in Asia and the Pacific banana germplasm is being collected and conserved in its centre of diversity.

Linking with partners globally

The International Musa Testing Programme, a partnership between NARS breeding programmes, scientists and INIBAP, has amassed data on the performance of new improved varieties through testing in multiple locations around the world. A number of high-performing varieties, which respond well to the disease burdens that exist in different parts of the world have been identified. They are now being made available to smallholder farmers.

which also helps to strengthen existing efforts and avoid duplication. Each level of collaboration, into which INIBAP has entered, has brought about very different results, forming a multifaceted approach (see the examples in the boxes) to a singular aim, that of improving smallholder banana production. In several cases the relationships have advanced little beyond a teething phase, however, in others such links have allowed the establishment of mechanisms for cooperation which now have a life of their own.

And networking has constraints

Although it is easy to proclaim the virtues of networking on paper, on the ground there are frequently frustrations and failures. Depending on a healthy spirit of collaboration in order to progress can prove prohibitive and there are a number of areas where pitfalls exist:

- Pursuing new ideas depends on developing consensus.



Linking with farmers in Uganda. Farmers are participating in research and receiving improved germplasm. (D. Karamura, INIBAP)

Linking with breeding programmes

INIBAP has long been linked with one of the major banana breeding programmes based at FHIA in Honduras. Through financial support INIBAP has assisted in the production of high performing banana varieties that are showing the first signs of promise in providing both acceptable fruit quality and improved yields for smallholder farmers.

Linking with farmers

INIBAP's involvement in farmer-participatory research is relatively recent, but demonstrates a continuing shift towards direct linkages with the end-users of research. Current projects on germplasm evaluation and conservation, and the testing of IPM options involve participating farmers in aspects of planning, implementation and data gathering. The fundamental role of farmers in the adoption of new technologies or new varieties is well recognized.

Linking with NGOs

Through a number of projects implemented by NGOs, INIBAP is supplying improved banana germplasm to smallholder farmers. Furthering links with NGOs is important because of their strong development focus and specific experience of working with people at the local level.



Linking with scientists

The advantages of networking, particularly that of enabling priorities to be set at a global level, are prominent in the global programme for Musa improvement, PROMUSA. This programme brings together all the major players in Musa improvement research through a framework of working groups, which share information and divide research responsibilities. Since the establishment of PROMUSA, a new spirit of collaboration and sharing is evident in Musa research, resulting in increased efficiency and better progress.

Musa researchers from around the world. PROMUSA brings partners together to enable priorities to be set at a global level.



Women farmers' group in Bushenyi district, Uganda, where INIBAP is conducting an on-farm conservation project, left. Farmers participating in research on IPM options in East Africa, right. (S. Sharrock, INIBAP)



- Efforts may be misguided through domination of any one party.
- Communication technologies are advancing rapidly but are not equally distributed. The lack of the necessary tools can result in isolation or exclusion of certain partners.
- Little opportunity exists for networking organizations or their staff to enjoy recognition or ownership of results.
- Demonstrating and quantifying the beneficial impact of networking is not easy. Therefore the role of a networking organization can be difficult to understand and justify.
- The outcome of commissioned-research is harder to control.
- Coordination is an essential function of networking. However many donors are not keen to cover the transaction costs associated with such coordination.

In 15 years, INIBAP has faced several challenges of networking. The problems, however, have not been insurmountable. Quite the contrary, they are a necessary evil to effect a healthy organizational evolution. One example of how INIBAP has adapted because of past experiences, is evident in the evolution of IMTP. This programme is now in its third phase and although, the aims and objectives of the programme have remained unchanged since its initiation, there have been distinct changes in programme structure with each successive phase. On completion of each IMTP phase, successes and failures have been evaluated and changes to the programme have occurred to suit the changing needs of partners. Thus in the latest phase, and in contrast to previous phases, partners are now free to choose the level of evaluation they wish to undertake and the varieties they

wish to include. Through employing a flexible approach it is intended that IMTP will respond to the partners as they themselves evolve.

A further area where change has been necessary concerns the regional networks. The first regional network, which was established in Latin America was very much an INIBAP initiative, mainly involving *Musa* scientists already working with INIBAP. In Africa however things were different. Lack of resources constrained INIBAP's activities here until the mid 1990s. However, African NARS became increasingly aware of the need to share resources to achieve common goals and took the initiative to form two networks themselves, with support from the sub-regional agricultural research fora (Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in East and Central Africa, ASARECA and West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development, WECARD/CORAF). The African networks, therefore, have always belonged to the NARS and the involvement of INIBAP as a coordinator and secretariat came about by request from the NARS, themselves. It is clear to INIBAP, that the NARS-led networks ensure better long term sustainability. INIBAP is therefore facilitating the reshaping of the Asian and Latin American networks according to the African model. In Latin America and the Caribbean, this has resulted in the re-launching of LACNET as *MUSALAC* under the auspices of FORAGRO.

Beyond networking

In INIBAP's case, the aims it has set itself (which are found at the beginning of each section in the main text of the annual report)

cannot be fulfilled by networking alone. A number of services must be provided which demand physical resources and sustainable management, as well as networking. In some cases the service is housed by INIBAP itself, in others the work is outsourced. The International *Musa* germplasm collection is an example where the physical host is not INIBAP, but KUL. INIBAP manages and develops the collection and enables the safe movement of germplasm around the world. Only through bringing the collection into one place in the temperate zone, can the ambition be attained to provide disease-free material to smallholder farmers worldwide without restriction.

In-house, INIBAP manages databases, produces publications and administers the *Musa* Germplasm Information System (MGIS). These activities produce tangible products that complement well, if not are essential to, network activities. The dependency on collaborators for information or technical advice remains strong.

Has networking produced results after 15 years?

In an address by the chair of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of CGIAR, Emil Javier, the practises of INIBAP were applied within the context of the seven operational

elements of the new CGIAR strategy proposed by TAC:

1. Poverty focus
2. Priority for South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa
3. Regional research planning
4. Bringing modern science to bear on CGIAR's goals
5. Closer integration of CGIAR activities with partners in the regions
6. Task force approach
7. Act as catalyst and integrator.

The manner in which INIBAP conducts business was recognised as incorporating each element very much into its agenda and providing, in some cases, a useful example. Also in 2000 a Centre-commissioned external review took place which looked deeply into the effectiveness of the *modus operandi*, this mixture of networking and service-providing. Its conclusion was that "INIBAP has found its niche in the global scientific community and... has proven that the network approach for banana and plantain is a valid approach satisfying a large number of producers, consumers and scientists in the world."

Such valuable reinforcement of INIBAP's achievement is highly useful in engineering good morale in the working organization, but more importantly provides gratification to INIBAP's collaborators and sends a message to all future collaborators that networking is working.



Phil Rowe, FHIA's expert banana breeder, with FHIA-25. (D. Jones, consultant)

Farmer in Davao, the Philippines. (D. Mowbray, Baobab Productions)

