



# Working Together, Learning Together

**LEARNING ALLIANCES IN AGROENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT**



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## LEARNING ALLIANCES IN AGROENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

Edited by Rupert Best, Shaun Ferris, and Paul Mundy

**Catholic Relief Services**



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## ACRONYMS

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Acordar	Alianza para la Creación de Oportunidades de Desarrollo Rural a través de Relaciones Agro-empresariales (Alliance to Create Rural Business Opportunities through Agro-Enterprise Relationships)
ACOS	Agricultural Commodity Suppliers
AGRA	Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa
ASARECA	Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CEMAC	Communauté Économique et Monétaire de l’Afrique Centrale (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa)
CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
CIAT	Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical (International Center for Tropical Agriculture)
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CORAF/WECARD	Conseil Ouest et Centre Africain pour la Recherche et le Développement Agricoles (West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development)
CORPEI	Corporación de Promoción de Exportaciones e Inversiones (Corporation for the Promotion of Exports and Investment)
CREPIC	Centro Regional de Productividad e Innovación del Cauca (Cauca Regional Center for Productivity and Innovation)
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
DAP	Development Assistance Program
DDO	Diocese Development Office
DFID	Department for International Development
DR-CAFTA	Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
FARA	Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa
FOSADEP	Northern Ghana Food Security and Agroenterprise Development Project
GFAR	Global Forum on Agricultural Research
GTZ	Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for Technical Cooperation)
IDRC	International Development Research Centre
IFAP	International Federation of Agricultural Producers
IITA	International Institute for Tropical Agriculture
INERA	Institut de l’environnement et des recherches agricoles
LAFISE	Latin American Financial Services
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa’s Development
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
PL	Public Law
SNV	Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers (Foundation of Netherlands Volunteers) now known as Netherlands Development Organisation
Swisscontact	Swiss Foundation for Technical Cooperation
UNA	National Agricultural University of Honduras
USAID	United States Agency for International Development





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- The writeshop participants (a full list of writeshop participants is contained in the companion book ‘Getting to Market: From Agriculture to Agroenterprise’) who provided input into the structure of the book and reviewed an initial draft
- The editorial team of Rupert Best, Shaun Ferris, and Paul Mundy
- The many staff of CRS’ partner organizations and researchers, whose knowledge and experiences are reflected in this book
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- The staff of CRS East Africa Regional Office in Nairobi and CRS HQ in Baltimore, who organized the logistics for the writeshop
- The management and staff of the Brakenhurst International Conference Center, Limuru, Kenya, where the writeshop was held



## FOREWORD

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Catholic Relief Services takes pride in being a dynamic organization that encourages innovation and adjusts the way we do business as global, national and local circumstances change. The challenges that we and our partners confront often seem insurmountable, and in a rapidly changing world new challenges constantly arise. So we cannot rest on our laurels. However successful we may be now, we cannot base our future as an organization solely on our past performance. We need to continually reflect on what we do, take risks, and try new ideas. We have to grow as an organization that champions a culture of learning and change, an essential condition for maintaining our relevance in this fast changing world.

This book leads us through a process of how CRS saw the opportunity to embrace a market- and business-oriented approach to agricultural development. Over time, we have come to a fuller understanding that the best way to help poor rural people move out of poverty is to boost household income in a sustained way. We concluded that building the capacity of poor farmers to engage in profitable enterprises had to become an integral part of our agricultural development strategy. This shift has required a whole new mind-set among managers and technical staff alike. Those who work in the field have had to learn new skills; managers have had to engage new staff with appropriate education and experience.

Our partnerships and alliances with others have been fundamental to our success in this process. New concepts and methods in agroenterprise development originating with researchers have been combined with many years of field experience on the part of CRS and other development agencies. This has provided the basis for an ongoing, mutual process of learning, practice, and reflection that has in turn led to new ways of working in the field.

Through this book, we would like to share the story of this learning process and how it has influenced change within CRS. It is having a profound influence on our performance in building the capacity of our development partners and poor farmers to confront the challenges of market-oriented agriculture. The process has also brought significant benefits to CRS. Most importantly, it has proved efficient and effective in providing us with a lasting capacity to respond to the needs of the farm families we serve.



Ken Hackett  
President



## PREFACE

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This is a book about a process for learning new things. The new thing that CRS wanted to learn was “agroenterprise development,” or how to successfully link smallholder farmers to markets. Over the years, CRS has become very proficient at providing relief support following disaster. In the agriculture sector this meant helping to provide critical assets that communities need to restart their agricultural activities. In the transition from relief to development, our attention remained focused on production with the objective of restoring the capacity of farmer households to feed themselves. This approach, while necessary, is not now sufficient to help poor farmers out of the rut of poverty. Farm families have needs that go beyond food, such as health, education for children, housing improvements—needs that can only be satisfied through having a cash income. Helping smallholder farmers to link profitably to markets in an equitable and sustainable manner therefore became imperative if we were to fulfill our mission of restoring the dignity of those who suffer the degradation of poverty.

The “learning journey” began in 2001 with parallel events in Central America and East Africa. We were not starting from scratch. In Latin America and southeast Asia the fundamental importance of a market orientation in finding a pathway out of poverty had been recognized, and market-development activities were being integrated into production-focused projects. In Africa we had pioneered a new approach to supplying seeds following disaster, called seed vouchers and fairs, which is an explicit attempt to reactivate the local market and not by-pass local suppliers by bringing seed in from outside. So the germ of a market orientation was already sown. But our challenge was to build an institutional capacity in agroenterprise development.

This book relates how we adopted a “learning alliance” approach to getting the job done. Serendipity had a role to play. CRS, an international development agency, was looking for agroenterprise skills. CIAT and IITA-FOODNET, international research and training institutions, were looking for development partners with whom to “ground-truth” the methodologies and tools that they had been developing to help smallholder farmers link to markets. A research-development partnership was established in which we pooled our expertise and mapped out an iterative process of learning, putting into practice what had been learned, and then analyzing and reflecting on the results. From small beginnings in East Africa and Central America in 2002, CRS is now involved in agroenterprise development learning alliances in more than 30 countries.

In 2008, we decided it was time to take stock, document our successes and failures, and decide on where we ought to be going in the future. In September a group of about 30 agroenterprise practitioners from across the world met in a Brackenhurst,

Limuru, Kenya for a one-week writeshop. The writeshop resulted in two products. One is this book, which concentrates on the learning process, how it evolved, and the benefits it has brought to CRS. Most importantly, we have highlighted the challenges that CRS faces as an institution in building on the investment we have made in strengthening our agroenterprise development capacity. The other book centers on the content on which that learning process was based. It describes how CRS has applied the agroenterprise development approach and how it has worked across a range of value chains and a range of countries. We are excited about the way in which both the content and the process of learning about agroenterprise has opened up a whole new way of thinking about development that is much more inclusive and less compartmentalized than the approaches we used before. We hope that by relating our experience we will instill this enthusiasm in our colleagues, both within CRS and among our key partners and collaborators in other agencies.

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# Introduction

Development organizations are constantly trying to find new, more effective ways to combat poverty. That means they are faced with two related problems: how to develop and test new approaches, and how to develop capabilities to implement them. An organization's own staff and its partners must both learn to apply the new skills, and they need guidance from specialists or experienced personnel.

The decision made by CRS to shift emphasis from production-based agriculture to agroenterprise provides an example of how these twin problems were tackled. In the mid- to late 1990s a few CRS country programs working on Title II Food for Peace projects began to experiment with agroenterprise development, then a relatively new approach being pioneered by a small number of research institutions and development organizations, among them the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). Evidence was accumulating that market-led approaches could help smallholder farmers climb out of poverty. While CRS recognized the potential in this new approach, few of its staff had experience with it. Nor was it clear that such an approach could work with chronically poor farming communities or those emerging from disaster. The question for CRS was how could the agency develop and adapt an approach to linking farmers with markets and at the same time rapidly build a critical mass of staff adept in using these methods?

The answer was to develop a series of **agroenterprise learning alliances** across CRS' operational regions. A learning alliance is a model of mutual, participatory learning involving research and development institutions and rural communities. It aims to accelerate institutional change, improve knowledge management, and deepen the level of impact. It consists of a series of hands-on training workshops in which participants—who remain together throughout the process—learn, exchange ideas, visit sites, and decide on activities to implement in the field before the next meeting. In contrast to a typical one-off training course, such a series of meetings enables the group to learn from one other, test approaches, and report back, thus benefiting from each other's experiences. The learning alliance is supported by intensive e-mail communication, a monitoring and reporting system, and one-on-one consultations during the intervals between meetings by specialist staff who visit the participants' individual projects.

The learning alliance approach has enabled CRS to establish strong agroenterprise development projects in over 30 countries across five regions in six years. These projects are managed by a group of trained, experienced staff, who have greatly benefited from the exchange of experiences with their colleagues in other countries throughout the world.

The learning alliance approach is very flexible. It works at a variety of levels: between regions, among countries within a region, and within a country. It can involve staff of a single agency and its local partners or span several development organizations and donors focusing on the same theme. It can be adapted to cover new steps in the development process. The approach can be used in a variety of development contexts, not just agroenterprise development. For example, CRS is now proposing a learning alliance on rice, in collaboration with the International Rice Research Institute, and another on integrated watershed management.

The agroenterprise learning alliance has profoundly transformed how CRS implements pro-poor agriculture programs (see Box 1). It has strengthened the capacity of CRS and its partners, reinvigorated interest in agriculture and positioned the agency to take advantage of new opportunities to link poor farm families to markets and help them climb out of poverty.

### **Box 1. CRS, agriculture, and the need for an agroenterprise approach**

CRS is a leading faith-based humanitarian organization that has worked to support people in need since 1943. From its initial focus on postwar recovery in Europe, CRS has grown into a global development agency with programs in over 100 countries. In all its work, its mission is to improve the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable. In support of the Millennium Development Goals, CRS is focusing its agricultural activities on improving the prospects of those living on less than \$2 per day and giving particular attention to women, children, and those suffering from disease.

Over the past 40 years CRS has maintained a longstanding commitment to agriculture in developing countries. Rural communities need greater support in their endeavors to improve food security, nutrition, income, and environmental stewardship. Despite its importance, and the high incidence of extreme poverty in rural areas, funding for agricultural development has been declining for many years. Lack of investment has led to stagnating productivity and poor uptake of improved technologies. Productivity gains and innovation have been particularly low in Africa, due to lack of basic infrastructure, inadequate credit and financial systems, and poor market access.

CRS' focus on food security through increasing food production alone did not seem to be working; it was not helping the poor climb out of deep and chronic poverty. Rapidly changing global market conditions and structural adjustments in the role of government mean that farmers face new challenges. Most farmers, and particularly the less well off, are poorly prepared to meet these challenges. It was for these reasons that CRS decided to incorporate a market and enterprise development approach to food security.

**Taking stock.** In September 2008 representatives of CRS' regional learning alliances met at Limuru, near Nairobi, to take stock of the learning alliance methodology and the agroenterprise approach in CRS' agricultural program. The meeting produced two books. The first (this book) examines CRS' experience in implementing agroenterprise learning alliances in five regions. It focuses on the learning alliance as a process for building capacity and for strengthening CRS as a learning organization. It highlights aspects that have worked particularly well for the organization and discusses a number of issues that require further attention. It concludes by outlining prospects for the future as CRS looks to capitalize its shift from a production focus to one that is increasingly market and business-oriented. This book is primarily intended for our colleagues within CRS, both in agriculture and in other sectors, who might be interested in applying the learning alliance process in similar or different contexts. However, we hope that it may

also be useful to a wider range of CRS' stakeholders who share our interest in exploring new ways of approaching difficult and complex development problems.

The second book, *Getting to Market: From Agriculture to Agroenterprise*, explains the agroenterprise development process as it was applied in the field. It illustrates the component parts of the process with a series of case studies taken from agroenterprise activities in Southeast Asia, South Asia, East and West Africa and Central America that CRS has undertaken with local partners and farmers.

# Learning Alliances in CRS and Their Application to Agroenterprise Development

## EVOLUTION

In 2001 and 2002, CRS' Latin America and East Africa regions took the first steps in building what has become a network of regional learning alliances in agriculture that spans the CRS world. The reasons behind this initiative were numerous and complex. They included:

- A desire to demonstrate the benefits of market-led approaches in relief and development
- Frustration with the effectiveness of traditional training programs
- A disappointing record of adoption of innovations in methodologies, technologies, and partnerships based on traditional training methods
- A lack of feedback in more typical learning processes
- Insufficient impact assessment and follow up

These learning alliances had two objectives:

- **Capacity building:** to create capacity in local institutions to identify and develop agroenterprises that generate income and employment within rural communities
- **Institutional change:** to establish long-term partnerships that achieve effective two-way institutional change

CRS' principal partner in the learning alliance has been the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). CIAT established its Rural Agroenterprise Development Project in 1996 as part of its natural resources management research strategy. By 2001, the project had created an area-based approach to identifying and developing agroenterprise options for smallholder farmers and piloted that approach in Latin America and East Africa. CIAT saw its partnership with CRS and other development organizations as vital to testing and adapting the approach in

different socioeconomic and cultural situations, and as a way to identify limitations to agroenterprise development that would open up new research areas.

In East Africa, FOODNET, a market and postproduction technology network of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA) run by the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, complemented this partnership. In Central America, a consortium approach was taken. Along with CIAT and CRS, this included CARE, the Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), the National Agricultural University of Honduras (UNA), Swisscontact, and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

**Table 1. Evolution of the learning alliance in CRS**

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Regions/countries involved</b>
January 1996	CIAT creates a Rural Agroenterprise Development Project as part of its natural resource management research strategy	Central America, Andean Region, East Africa, Southeast Asia
2001–2002	CIAT and CARE pilot an agroenterprise learning alliance in Nicaragua	Central America
September 2001	Mutual and complementary interests of CRS and CIAT are identified and the idea of a partnership in East Africa with FOODNET is born	East Africa
September 2002	First East Africa Agroenterprise Learning Alliance workshop, Nairobi, Kenya	Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Madagascar, Uganda, Sudan. Later: Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi and Eritrea
August 2003	First Central American Learning Alliance Workshop in El Salvador with CRS, CARE, GTZ, UNA, IDRC participation	El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala
June 2004	Workshop to design a proposal for an Agroenterprise Learning Alliance in the Andean Region, Cali, Colombia, with participation of CIAT, CARE, Intercooperation, IICA, Swisscontact, CORPEI, CREPIC, GTZ, SNV	Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia

January 2005	Global CRS Learning Alliance “kick-off” workshop, Nyeri, Kenya	East, West, Central, and Southern Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Latin America
May 2005	First West and Central Africa Learning Alliance workshop, Niamey, Niger	Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Gambia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Benin (Benin later withdraws)
June 2005	First Southeast Asia Learning Alliance workshop, Davao, Philippines	Philippines, Vietnam, Timor-Leste, Cambodia
July 2006	First South Asia Learning Alliance Workshop, Gujarat, India	India, Afghanistan
July 2007	Agriculture and Environment Program review. CRS outlines way toward “industry leadership”	East, West, Central, and Southern Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Latin America
September 2008	Global Agroenterprise Writeshop, Limuru, Kenya	East, West, Central, and Southern Africa, South and Southeast Asia, Latin America

Since 2001, the learning alliance process within CRS has been consolidated and expanded (see Table 1). The positive experiences in East Africa and Central America between 2002 and 2004 led to a global meeting in Nairobi in January 2005, which launched agroenterprise learning alliance processes in three additional regions: South Asia, Southeast Asia, and West Africa.

**Industry leader in agroenterprise.** In 2007, CRS undertook a strategic evaluation of its Agricultural and Environment Program.<sup>1</sup> As a result, CRS adopted the vision of becoming an “industry leader” in market and business-oriented transitioning of poor communities from disaster recovery to agricultural development. CRS aims to achieve this by:

- Continued strengthening of the organization’s competence and capacity in agroenterprise development skills and experience
- Establishing strategic alliances with key research and development institutions
- Integrating agroenterprise components with other CRS sectors and programs

<sup>1</sup> Catholic Relief Services, *Agroenterprise Development*.

- Integrating agroenterprise into projects that focus on microfinance, natural resources management, health and nutrition and HIV/AIDS
- Building on the organization's culture of learning and knowledge sharing

### **THE LEARNING ALLIANCE PROCESS: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT WORKS**

All too often, new technologies and techniques and social innovations remain confined to small pockets of success, inaccessible to others. The learning alliance is an attempt to overcome this.<sup>2</sup>

In a rapidly changing sociopolitical environment, development agencies are increasingly being asked to empower rural communities to engage more effectively in the marketplace. To do this, the agencies need skills and methods to evaluate markets and develop new rural business opportunities. In the late 1990's these were skills which most development agencies lacked. The learning alliance enables them to share knowledge and build capacity in a learning environment that is demand-led, practice-based, and flexible enough to meet the needs of diverse participants.

A learning alliance is a process undertaken jointly by different stakeholders with a common interest or goal. Typically, stakeholders might include research organizations, donor and development agencies, universities, policy makers, and private businesses. The process involves identifying, sharing, and adapting good research, development, and business practices in specific contexts. These good practices can then be used to strengthen capacities for development activities, generate and document development outcomes, identify future research needs and areas for collaboration, and inform public- and private-sector policy decisions.

The learning alliance relies on an iterative learning process among multiple stakeholders. It draws on knowledge and information from different sources and across multiple scales, from local to international. The approach is dynamic and flexible. It can be varied and adapted to suit the context and requirements of the stakeholders. As the partners' skills and experience increase, their needs are likely to change. For example, the initial focus may be on building capacity; it may progressively move to developing new methods or generating information for influencing policy decisions (Table 2). The practical caveat is that in shifting the focus over time, the need remains for continuous training and learning (the first row in the table).

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<sup>2</sup> This section is adapted from Lundy, M. and Gottret, M.V., "Learning Alliances."



**Table 2. Types of learning alliance**

<b>Learning alliance type</b>	<b>Need</b>	<b>Focus</b>
1	Building capacity and skills base	Training and learning using concrete, practical approaches and proven methods
2	Developing new methods, tools and approaches	Action-research that generates field guides on good practice
3	Generating information that can lead to policy influence	Conventional socioeconomic research to understand principles and lessons across experiences

Box 2 lists some guiding principles for the learning alliance.

The learning alliance approach differs substantially from the common practice of attempting to train development practitioners in new methods through short, one-off training courses. It involves establishing a series of “learning spaces,” typically over 12 to 24 months, and takes place through a series of steps:

- Identification of a common goal, sourcing of relevant knowledge and expertise, and definition of roles and responsibilities
- Learning with direction from best-practice guides
- Putting into practice what has been learned
- Reflection, feedback, and documentation on what has worked well and what has not, and on the performance of learning alliance participants
- Further cycles of learning, practice, reflection, and feedback, designed according to subject matter and the needs of participants

The above steps are complemented by mentoring and monitoring through visits to field projects, and by online communities that facilitate dialogue among participants and serve as a repository for key documents and reports.

## **Box 2. Guiding principles of learning alliances**

### **Clear objectives**

Partners in the learning alliance will have different objectives and interests. It is necessary to identify and negotiate common interests based on their practices, needs, capacities, and interests. For example, CRS and its learning alliance partners have a common interest in rural enterprise development. Beneath this overarching topic, more specific interests are defined.

### **Shared responsibilities, costs, and benefits**

Organizations and individuals participate in learning alliances when: (1) they think they benefit, (2) the expected benefits outweigh the costs of participating, (3) they expect greater benefits than if they were to work individually, and (4) the results do not conflict with other key interests. As learning alliances seek to benefit all parties, the costs and responsibilities, as well as benefits and credit for achievements, need to be shared among the partners in a transparent fashion.

### **Outputs as inputs, documentation, and experience sharing**

Communities are diverse, and there are no universal recipes for sustainable development. Learning alliances view the outputs of research and development as inputs to use in creating change at specific times and places. Users need to adapt the methods and tools to suit their own situations. Key outputs of the learning alliance include understanding the reasons for such adaptations and their positive or negative effects on livelihoods, and documenting and sharing the new techniques and the lessons gained in implementing them.

### **Differentiated learning mechanisms**

Learning alliances may have a diverse range of participants: rural women, men, and young people; extension service and NGO workers; entrepreneurs, policy makers, and scientists. Identifying each group's questions and willingness to participate in the learning process is critical to success. Flexible but connected learning methods are needed. These can range from participatory techniques and monitoring and evaluation, through conventional impact assessment, to the development of innovation histories.

### **Long-term, trust-based relationships**

Rural development processes stretch over many years or even decades. To ensure positive change and understand why that change has occurred requires long-term, stable relationships that can evolve to meet new challenges. Trust is the glue that cements and sustains these relationships. It develops gradually as partners interact with each other and perceive concrete benefits from the alliance.

In summary, a well-functioning learning alliance achieves the following outputs:

- Cumulative and shared knowledge about approaches, methods and policies that work in different places, cultural contexts, and times (as well as those that do not), and the reasons for success or failure
- Learning opportunities across organizational and geographical boundaries through the establishment and support of communities of practice around specific topics
- Synergy among multiple actors by providing a vehicle for collaboration, helping to highlight and develop diverse solutions to problems that may appear intractable to the individual actors
- Healthy innovation systems by building bridges between islands of experience, helping to assess how these results were achieved and what others can learn from these experiences

### **THE CRS AGROENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT ROADMAP**

Typically, small-scale farmers produce small amounts of poor quality, low-value commodities using traditional, low-input farming techniques. They have weak trading relationships and face declining real prices for their goods and stiff competition from medium- to large-scale producers. Lack of coordination means they have little or no influence over the prices paid to them: they are “price takers” in the market.

In today’s market-driven environment, production-based approaches to rural agricultural development alone will not succeed in alleviating poverty. Ignoring the marketing element is self-defeating, even when seeking the basic aim of sustainable food security.

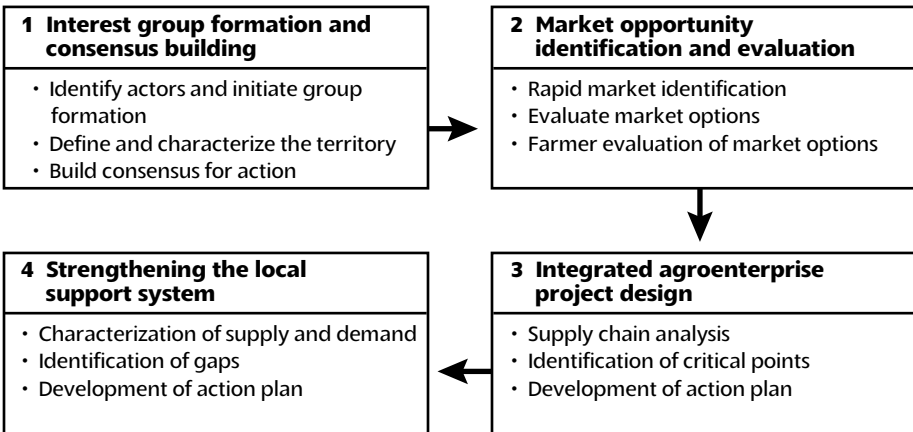
Among the options that farmers have for moving out of this situation and improve their market competitiveness are:

- Improving production methods and techniques
- Finding economies of scale
- Diversifying to higher-value crops and livestock products
- Adding value to products
- Developing business relationships and locking in buyers over longer time periods at good prices
- Accessing financial and other business development services that help strengthen their market linkages

Agroenterprise development is a strategy for building the entrepreneurial capacity of small-scale farmers in rural communities. It provides a methodology for shifting the focus of interventions from increasing production to identifying and responding to market demands and setting the farmers on a path to achieving the options listed above.

The agroenterprise development approach aims to enable public and private institutions to assist rural communities in making their existing agricultural products more competitive and systematically diversifying into other, higher-value products. The approach promotes a “market chain” or “value chain,” perspective that strengthens producer groups’ relations with service providers and their business linkages with higher-order market chain actors. The focus is not just on the farm. Agroenterprise development methods also emphasize the need for business agility and responsiveness and continual innovation because of the dynamic nature of markets, and collective action as a way to take pilot projects to scale.

Over the past 10 years, agroenterprise development methods and approaches have been used in collaborative projects developed by CRS, CIAT, and other organizations in Latin America, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. The approach has followed the path laid out in the “agroenterprise roadmap” shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Agroenterprise development “version 1.0”:** CIAT’s original road map

### *Interest group formation and consensus building*

CRS’ approach to agroenterprise development is based on an area. It is not a commodity approach. This means that it aims to improve the livelihoods of the inhabitants of a selected rural community, district, or cluster of districts through improved production–market linkages. The commodities or products to be focused on are selected by matching three things: the demands of the market, the area’s resource endowment, and the target population’s livelihood objectives. Although the

focus of the beneficiary group is area based, once a product has been developed its market chain may reach well beyond the focus area.

Agroenterprise development is a complex process, and it is unlikely that all the skills it requires will be found in one organization. Therefore, collaboration with organizations that share the same development goals and have complementary skills and experience is vital for developing an agroenterprise strategy. This collaboration is achieved by forming a working group to facilitate agroenterprise development processes within the chosen area. The working group usually includes representation from producer organizations and NGOs and participation by public and private sector actors. The strategy planning by the working group includes an assessment of the biophysical and socioeconomic resources of the chosen area, with particular emphasis on opportunities and constraints for agroenterprise development. This initial assessment forms the basis on which the working group chooses target beneficiaries and develops an agroenterprise action plan.

### *Market opportunity identification and evaluation*

One of the first questions that the working group needs to address is what crops, livestock, or other natural resource-based products are most likely to generate positive results for the area. They undertake market opportunity identification studies to respond to three main questions:

- What products—existing or new—show strong market demand in terms of increasing volumes and prices?
- Which of these products can be profitably produced in the region, given the biophysical characteristics, infrastructure, access to productive resources, business capacity, and existing livelihood strategies?
- Of those products, which are of interest to smallholders?

The result is a portfolio of opportunities with favorable responses to the three questions. The size and diversity of this portfolio may vary, but it normally includes from five to 30 possibilities. Through active involvement of producers' representatives and farmer involvement in setting appropriate selection and weighting of criteria, the most attractive enterprise options are chosen for further analysis.

### *Integrated agroenterprise project design*

Once a manageable set of enterprise options—usually between one and three—have been chosen, a market chain analysis is undertaken for each. To the extent possible, the analysis is done by the farmers, facilitated by the service providers that support these activities. The participation of these actors helps generate collectively owned information and a consensus for action. The analysis covers the farm-to-market chain activities and important cross-cutting areas: business organization, the provision of

business development services, and the policies or regulations that affect the chain's operation. As scale of the intervention increases, the market chain analysis becomes more sophisticated and will require specialist assistance. In this case farmers maybe represented at the most relevant sections of the chain analysis.

At the end of the analysis, consensus-building workshops are held where the information gathered is shared and discussed. The purpose of these workshops is to identify positive synergies among the actors, common interests, and critical points where strategic investments can achieve high returns. The aim is to generate a common business development vision among the various actors for improving the competitiveness and sustainability of the selected chain.

To attain the desired vision, an action plan is prepared with support and participation from actors throughout the chain, including farmers, traders, processors, and buyers. This plan includes both development and research activities for short-term (immediate), medium-, or long-term implementation. Interventions are likely to include activities related to production, post-harvest handling and processing, market development, farmer organization, business and finance. Depending on the availability of local resources, external funding opportunities and donor interest, specific activities may be disaggregated into discrete projects, while conserving a clear idea of how the individual parts fit together to form a coherent path to the desired vision.

### *Strengthening the local support system*

The subsequent implementation of the agroenterprise action plan will include linking to local business development services (BDS). In some cases local BDS will require strengthening, and where they are absent they must be developed. These services might include, for example, accessing the seed of a particular variety that has the quality characteristics the market requires, or developing a business plan for the farmer organization to access a production credit. The desired end point of CRS' intervention is where farmer enterprises can access services they need to maintain their competitiveness and sustainability over time, without external support.

Business development services cover financial, nonfinancial, formal, and informal services: credit, input supply, technical assistance and training, research, market information and intelligence, market linkage, business administration and management support, etc. If farmers and local entrepreneurs can access these services, they can expand and diversify their enterprises, and more local people can start similar activities. CRS is eager to develop further expertise in creating a market for such services to be provided without further external subsidies.

Box 3 summarizes the major features of the agroenterprise development approach outlined in the preceding paragraphs.

### **Box 3. Major features of the CIAT-CRS agroenterprise development approach**

#### **Area-based**

The approach is focused on improving the livelihoods of the rural population within a defined geographical area. It impacts on community-based agroenterprises, while strengthening business development services and promoting supportive local policy and regulatory frameworks.

#### **Market-led**

It enables farmers and other entrepreneurs to identify and access markets for existing or new products that have growth potential.

#### **Partnership-based and participatory**

Multi-stakeholder working groups with like-minded institutions that have complementary skills, including representatives of CRS' target population, ensure inclusive decision-making and ownership of the agroenterprise development process.

#### **Thinking beyond the farm**

Partners, collaborators and target farmers are encouraged to think beyond the farm, using a market chain focus where interventions address critical constraints at different points along the chain.

#### **Fostering business relationships**

Strong relationships with traders, processors and other commercial buyers help farmers and their organizations achieve greater understanding of market dynamics and improve their entrepreneurial skills.

#### **Farmer organization**

Self-selected producer groups that progressively provide important services for their members, usually initiating with savings and loans and collective or bulk marketing, improve the competitiveness of smallholder agriculture.

#### **Savings and self-reliance oriented**

Individual and group assets and self reliance of community members are built through savings and loans groups; these groups also build confidence in financial management and social cohesion.

#### **Continuous innovation**

Farmer business organizations develop the capacity to experiment and test innovations as a means of confronting the dynamic nature of markets.

#### **Empowering communities**

The desired endpoint of the approach is that local service providers, farmers and small-scale entrepreneurs have the skills and confidence to engage with markets profitably and sustainably over the long term.

## APPLYING THE LEARNING ALLIANCE CONCEPT TO AGROENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

CRS and its partners have built the technical skills of their staff to undertake and supervise the agroenterprise process through an iterative process of learning, practice, reflection, and feedback over a period of 12 to 24 months. Figure 2 illustrates this process.

Typically, four workshops are held, spaced at intervals of three to six months, depending on the rate of progress or where the date would fall in the agricultural calendar. Each workshop deals with a stage of the agroenterprise development process. Participants discuss concepts, undertake group exercises and examine case studies. They undertake field work with farmers' groups, traders, and other market actors to practice collecting information using checklists and questionnaires, and to exercise their participatory skills.

Following each workshop, participants return to their own countries and put into practice what they have learned. At the following workshop, the first day is taken up with staff from each country reporting on their progress. They emphasize what has worked well for them, and highlight areas where they have encountered difficulties. On the last day of each workshop, participants develop work plans to implement before the next workshop.

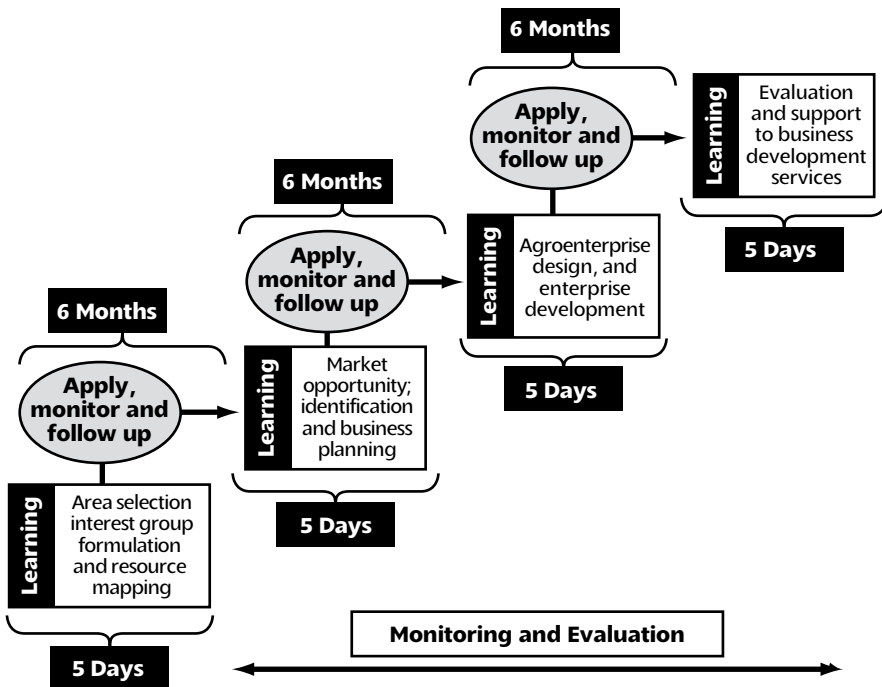


Figure 2. Sequence of activities in building capacity in agroenterprise development



# Regional Learning Alliance Experiences

This section summarizes CRS' experience with learning alliances for agroenterprise development in five regions: Central America, East Africa, West Africa, Southeast Asia and South Asia. The experiences differ markedly in their scope and focus. This is a result of the different political, socioeconomic, and cultural conditions specific to each region that in turn have influenced prior CRS experience with and progress in agroenterprise development.

## **TRANSFORMING PRODUCERS INTO ENTREPRENEURS: THE CENTRAL AMERICA LEARNING ALLIANCE EXPERIENCE**

JEFFERSON SHRIVER, CRS NICARAGUA

CRS in Central America has programs in El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua. Three out of every five people in this region are impoverished, and two in five live in extreme poverty. High rates of malnutrition and illiteracy are typical, as is the lack of basic services such as sewage, water, and electricity. Exacerbating this situation is a water-scarcity problem of crisis proportions brought about by severe rates of deforestation. More forests were destroyed in the region from 1950 to 1990 than in the previous 500 years.

Agriculture in the region represents a significant and growing share of both gross domestic product and the labor market. Yet extreme poverty and malnutrition continue to plague small and medium-sized farmers. Smallholders face steep barriers to enter competitive commodities markets that demand consistent and abundant volume, standardized quality, and environmental, labor, and phytosanitary compliance, as well as a sophisticated knowledge of market trends and access to export brokers. Yet important opportunities exist for those farmers to break into such markets. Encouraged by the approval of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) in 2005, major multinational companies, international buyers and exporters are looking to rapidly increase trade with and among Central American countries.

Recognizing the importance of market-oriented development for the region's poor farmers, CRS has since the late 1990s incorporated agroenterprise-related activities

into its agricultural projects. Over the years staff have attained considerable agroenterprise skills and experience. However, there had been little attempt to systematize, learn from or share these experiences within the country programs in the region. In addition, CRS and its partners operated largely in isolation from other development agencies working on rural and agricultural development.

### *The Learning Alliance*

The Central America Learning Alliance was born out of this context, as a laboratory of innovation for leading NGOs in the region to help small-scale farmers achieve more sustainable livelihoods. In 2002, the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) began to plan an initiative in the four countries known as “CA4”—Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. CRS became involved in early 2003 after it organized a regional field visit with CIAT and IDRC, and a multi-institutional partnership ensued. The founding participants in the learning alliance were IDRC, CRS, CARE Nicaragua, CIAT, the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), Swisscontact, and the National Agrarian University of Catacamas, Honduras. Funding was provided by IDRC from September 2003 to December 2007. In that period, the alliance brought together development organizations, researchers, international donors, governmental institutions, and the private sector around the common themes of supporting the growth of rural agroenterprises, improving research, and promoting policies that improve the rural livelihoods of populations in the four countries.

### *Agroenterprise Learning Alliance Drivers*

Four sets of factors in particular drove CRS’ interest in the learning alliance.

## **1. FINANCIAL SERVICES, MARKET INFORMATION, AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE**

The millions of small-scale farmers who raise staple crops and make up the largest part of the agricultural sector have the least access to financial services. These farmers also have limited access to improved seed, irrigation technologies and technical assistance. Coffee and cacao farmers, for example, suffer from inadequate post-harvest infrastructure which is required for wet and dry milling and fermentation. These farmers also do not know how to use organic farming methods, which prevents them from entering the lucrative organic markets for coffee and cocoa. Farmers find it hard to obtain market prices and other information that would let them make more informed decisions about sales agreements and crop selection from year to year. In addition, small-scale farmers need better access to market intelligence and resources that would help them to identify new market channels, ways to add value, legal requirements

for agroindustrial products, providers of packaging materials, and lists of enterprise service providers for rural enterprises.

## **2. ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS**

Lack of irrigation prevents poor farmers from increasing their production through double- or triple-cropping, growing crops in the off-season to take advantage of higher prices, or serving markets that require a regular supply throughout the year. Farmers who do have access to irrigation often use energy-inefficient and environmentally destructive techniques, eroding the soil and depleting local water supplies. Overuse of agrochemicals can pollute water supplies, damage crops and spread disease or pests. National and international markets for fresh produce are constantly raising standards of food safety, quality and consistency. Producers must comply with agricultural and manufacturing standards for storage, chemical usage, water use and treatment, as well as waste-water and solid waste management. Meeting these standards requires investment and technical assistance. Banking and microfinance institutions may finance seed and agrochemicals but not the live barriers, latrines, water storage tanks, storage sheds, and more that farmers need to qualify to compete in those lucrative markets.

## **3. INSUFFICIENT SCALE**

For small and medium-sized farmers, creating economies of scale depends on their ability to organize cooperatively. But scarce capital prevents farmers from investing in post-harvest infrastructure, such as storage facilities or crop-processing equipment, and the volumes produced by individual family farms are too small to be relevant to end-purchasers. Farmers facing the market alone have fewer means to access technical assistance regarding farm planning and market-price information. Cooperative enterprises that bring together farmers frequently lack basic financial management skills, solid governance structures, and the production facilities to add value to their crops through processing and packaging.

## **4. CHANGING POLICY ENVIRONMENT**

In 2003, as elements of the CAFTA agreement were being drawn up and negotiated, USAID instructed its PL 480 Title II programs<sup>3</sup> to integrate market-related approaches into their food security programs. By 2006, it had become clear that Title II programs would be reduced from 77 to countries to 15, and that CRS and other traditional Title II programs would have to adapt to a new funding environment with shrinking

<sup>3</sup> Public Law 480, also known as Food for Peace (and commonly abbreviated PL 480), is a funding avenue by which U.S. food can be used for overseas aid. The law has four parts or titles. The main use of Title II is for Emergency and Development Assistance Programs.

USAID resources for agriculture. One of the primary instruments USAID Country Missions in Central America have promoted since 2005 is the Global Development Alliance, which encourages partnerships with the private sector. Such partnerships are required to bring new private-sector funds to the table to match USAID funding at least one-for-one. NGOs that can do so may avoid the usual competitive “request for proposal” and “request for application” processes. While Guatemala qualified as one of the 15 countries slated to receive future Title II funding, Nicaragua and the rest of Central America are no longer eligible.

### *Evolution of the Learning Alliance*

During the initial 2003–2007 period, the learning alliance emphasized market opportunity identification, group formation, analysis of production chains, and business plan development as primary strategies.

At the beginning of the period, food-security development approaches among learning alliance members focused primarily on agriculture production and increasing yields, and secondarily on the beginnings of market analysis and market demand. Other themes included watershed management, producer organization, and subsidized technical assistance. Almost none of the members established relationships with the private sector. Member organizations of the alliance were also not accustomed to sharing information with each other, out of fear of losing a competitive advantage with donors.

Four years later, the learning alliance had gone from nine direct regional partners to 25 (20 development organizations and five research organizations). CRS Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador all maintained their involvement, while CRS Honduras withdrew due to budget limitations and a lack of clarity regarding how to begin with agroenterprise practice. Private-sector relationships grew exponentially to include active relationships with 10 major companies in Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Engagement with local organizations (farmer and other) also ballooned—from 12 to 61 in Nicaragua, from 2 to 5 in El Salvador, from 1 to 38 in Honduras, and 3 to 12 in Guatemala, for a total of 116 local organizations involved. Direct regional partners established relationships with 12 universities in the region with complementary research and development initiatives.

**The usual way to learn is to sit down, receive training and take that learning to your organization or use it personally; the learning alliance is different, it’s about learning from everyone, even those considered to be competitors and learning to gain confidence.**

*Lourdes Centeno, CRS El Salvador*

The positive experience of the regional learning alliance has spawned the formation of national learning alliances in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala.<sup>4</sup> These alliances, made up principally of NGOs and research and training institutions, reach consensus amongst their members about which themes to focus on during a given year. Among their objectives are the sharing of learning processes among the members, and knowledge management to influence public policy and practice that offer incentives for the development of sustainable and inclusive value chains. In the case of Nicaragua, each of the nine members of the alliance contributes \$2,000 per year to cover overhead costs and some operational activities.

In 2008 the members of the regional alliance defined a second phase that will strengthen learning themes of the first phase, and consider enterprise performance in areas of value chain development strengthening and governance.

### *Program Growth and Benefits*

CRS' agroenterprise projects carried out in the region from 2003 to 2007 had a total value of \$12.9 million. A new coffee regional agroenterprise project, building directly on local partnerships and strategies that emerged from the learning alliance, was recently approved by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation. That project, which began in October 2008 and totals \$8.3 million, brings the total external funding awarded to CRS in Central America for agroenterprise activities to \$21.2 million. A number of additional agroenterprise projects are in the pipeline. Such growth would simply not have been possible without the creative thinking, reflection, and research sparked by the learning alliance.

Partly in response to changing donor expectations along with a readiness to take farmers to another socioeconomic level, CRS Guatemala and Nicaragua retrofitted agroenterprise interventions into their Title II food security programs directly in line with the learning alliance road map (Figure 1). The two country programs measured progress by adding agroenterprise indicators to their Development Assistance Programs (DAP), measuring income and employment from sales of traditional and nontraditional crops sold in competitive markets. CRS Nicaragua, projecting the end of its DAP in 2008, drew from the DAP experience to "graduate" 1,200 market-ready farmers from the 5,000 total to work in a standalone agroenterprise project in 2005.

The most ambitious application of the agroenterprise learning alliance to date in Central America is CRS Nicaragua's Alliance to Create Rural Business Opportunities through Agro-Enterprise Relationships (Acordar). CRS Nicaragua took advantage of its five-year relationship and high levels of confidence with key

<sup>4</sup> For a complete overview of the learning alliance in Central America see CIAT and IDRC, *Diversified Livelihoods through Effective Agroenterprise Interventions*.

private sector commodity buyers engaged in its Title II program to design a Global Development Alliance project. Initiated in 2007, Acordar is a 20-member, public-private sector alliance to increase the incomes, ensure permanent employment, and strengthen the commercialization capacities of 5,400 poor rural families in 44 municipalities. Through this project, CRS Nicaragua is for the first time engaging cooperative enterprises directly with sub-grants. The project is strengthening 85 grassroots cooperatives and eight associations of cooperatives. It is working to convert unorganized supply chains into value chains, in which there is commitment among all the actors in the chain to work together, in coffee, cocoa, roots and tubers, fruits and vegetables and red and black beans. Over the life of the project, the sales of the harvests determined by the markets are expected to increase by \$57 million, and 23,000 permanent jobs should be generated.

## **BRINGING AGROENTERPRISE TO AFRICA: THE EAST AFRICA LEARNING ALLIANCE**

TOM REMINGTON, CRS AFRICA

CRS' East Africa Region, comprising Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania is characterized by both chronic and acute food insecurity. Widespread civil and military conflict, along with frequent floods and drought, exacerbate an already chronically bad situation. CRS' activities in East Africa focus extensively on agricultural recovery from disaster, especially through seed vouchers and fairs. In this generally arid region, most CRS agriculture programs embrace an integrated water resource management approach. The agency has received significant funding from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation to support this work in Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania. Another focus of CRS' agricultural program efforts in the region is the Great Lakes Cassava Initiative, funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and headquartered in Nairobi. This \$22-million project seeks to control disease pandemics that have crippled production of this critical staple crop in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

### *The East Africa Learning Alliance Experience*

In East Africa, agricultural programming has traditionally focused on food security, which was interpreted as increasing food production for consumption. Over time, the realization emerged that a low input-low output model offered no real pathway out of poverty. Efforts to find a more effective approach to agricultural development centered on partnerships with the different international agriculture research centers, which brought CRS together with the IITA-FOODNET market project. CRS began to include a market focus in agricultural proposals, especially the Title II projects in Kenya, Uganda,

Tanzania, and Rwanda (Rwanda and Burundi were part of CRS East Africa until 2003). However, it lacked an agroenterprise approach and capacity.

The idea of an agroenterprise learning alliance with IITA–FOODNET and CIAT emerged during a September 2001 workshop at Entebbe. CIAT and IITA were frustrated with the ineffectiveness of one-off intensive technology transfer workshops they were doing, and the learning alliance approach offered an alternative that could increase the effectiveness with which products from research could be tested and translated into practice. The learning alliance kicked off in 2002, with Rupert Best of CIAT and Shaun Ferris of IITA as principal trainers, and Tom Remington as the CRS facilitator.

### *The Process*

The East Africa agroenterprise learning alliance began as an alliance between IITA–FOODNET, CIAT, and CRS and its implementing partners across ten countries in East, Central, and Southern Africa: Burundi, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Progress and divergence were immediate. Agriculture programs in the Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, and Tanzania offices took up the idea eagerly. But the new approach had difficulty getting traction in countries and regions recovering from conflict—Burundi, Eritrea, Rwanda, southern Sudan, and northern Uganda—as staff could not invest the time required by this approach. Malawi dropped out after failing to get country program financial support. In short, the alliance developed as a core of four countries, with other countries participating intermittently and mainly as observers.

Participant turnover was very high, which helped spread the knowledge of agroenterprise, but did little to deepen capacity. The four workshops planned initially were followed by three more to train new staff, provide refresher courses, and enable practitioners to share experiences as an emerging community of practice.

The commitment of CIAT and CRS (IITA dropped out with the shift of Shaun Ferris to CIAT) led to the development of an ambitious proposal to USAID to fund a global development alliance. Though the proposal did not attract USAID funding, the effort to develop it engaged CRS globally and sparked the establishment of new learning alliances in South Asia, Southeast Asia and West Africa.

### *Impact*

Agroenterprise development has become an institutionalized part of agricultural programming in four countries of CRS East Africa: Ethiopia, Kenya, Madagascar, and Tanzania. Four other countries, Burundi, Malawi, Sudan and Uganda, have

maintained interest and have succeeded in funding some agroenterprise activities and hiring staff.

Outputs of the seven workshops conducted through the learning alliance include a core team of staff qualified to train others in agroenterprise, develop proposals, and implement activities such as market chain analyses and agroenterprise intervention planning. Market chain analyses were completed on chickpea, green gram, rice, navy bean, potatoes, and groundnuts. Agroenterprise activities in these six value chains are being implemented with increasing numbers of farmer groups and volumes and value of sales.

Though it was not easy or universal, CRS has completed the roadmap milestones in East Africa: identifying and characterizing territories, forming working groups, designing and conducting market opportunity identification studies, completing market chain analyses, and designing and implementing agroenterprise activities. The crops covered include navy bean and potatoes in Ethiopia, green gram and groundnuts in Kenya, and chickpea and pigeonpea in Tanzania. In Madagascar the learning alliance led to an annual national learning alliance, with support from the Ministry of Agriculture. The Malagasy approach also differed in scale from those of the other East African countries. Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Kenya focused on a limited number of value chains, whereas Madagascar emphasized off-season cropping, which was highly diversified. Embracing a value chain approach and the concept of business service provision has enabled CRS to recognize and engage in broader partnerships with research, government, civil society (both NGOs and farmer associations), and the private sector.

Though the roster of participants in the learning alliance has changed continuously, a small, cohesive and dynamic community of practice has emerged. This small group of close colleagues has developed national level training programs, with translations of the agroenterprise documentation into local languages. The group continues to share information and learn together. Participation in the learning alliance has made individuals more accountable: they need to embrace their learning, adhere to the agroenterprise principles, and ensure that others in their country programs do so as well.

Quite early in the learning process, the staff recognized that their methods of working with farmer groups, which are central to successful and sustainable agroenterprise, were inadequate. That realization led to an ambitious multiregional study tour of farmers' groups, which culminated in the articulation of the multi-skill farmer group approach now being tested throughout Africa.<sup>5</sup> With the development of that approach, along with increased linkage between agroenterprise and microfinance programming, there is increased integration across the agency.

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<sup>5</sup> CRS and CIAT, *Preparing Farmer Groups to Engage Successfully with Markets*.



The CRS Ethiopia investment in the navy bean value chain led to an opportunity to collaborate with nontraditional partners in a new Gates Foundation-funded project. This has taken agroenterprise to a new level of scale and market penetration. The current work has enabled CRS to follow the navy bean value chain all the way to European canning factories. New partnerships have enabled the Ethiopian team to develop the outlines of a new business model that aims to provide a more durable business relationship between the informal world of the thousands of atomized Ethiopian navy bean farmers and the highly formalized world of industrial food processors. The CRS Tanzania team has undertaken an in-depth evaluation of its chickpea value chain work, which documents the close integration of agroenterprise ideas with savings led microfinance methods. This important learning document outlines a method through which agroenterprise investment and scaling can be achieved through savings-led groups. These two events represent major successes for the learning alliance and lay the groundwork for increased levels of project investment in market-led development for poor smallholders.

### *Conclusions*

In six years the agroenterprise learning alliance has significantly improved the knowledge of key CRS and partner staff, deepened their understanding of the role that agroenterprise can play in alleviating chronic rural poverty, and dramatically changed how CRS East Africa designs and implements agricultural projects. The explicit decision to welcome new participants over seven workshops has helped to spread the agroenterprise idea widely.

The learning alliance approach has enabled the agency to first recognize problems and gaps in agroenterprise theory and then to correct and quickly close them. It has confirmed the primary focus on existing products for existing or new markets, with particular emphasis on upgrading value chains of staples such as the pulses (chickpea, pigeonpea, navy bean), root crops, and rice, which are traded both regionally and globally. These achievements in turn have put CRS in a better position to respond to the problems and opportunities presented by the current global food price crisis.

The success of the East Africa learning alliance, along with that of other agroenterprise alliances within the agency, has encouraged similar efforts in different sectors, such as nutrition and water. Looking ahead, with the benefit of this experience and in the light of the food price crisis, CRS hopes to develop new learning alliances with the International Rice Research Institute and with its 60-plus partners in the Great Lakes Cassava Project, and to integrate water-use management techniques into the ongoing agroenterprise learning platforms.

## **BUILDING AGROENTERPRISE SKILLS TO INCREASE RURAL INCOMES IN WEST AFRICA**

JOSEPH SEDGO, CRS WEST AFRICA

In West Africa, food insecurity continues to be one of the greatest challenges faced by millions of households, particularly in rural areas. About 40 million adults are undernourished, as well as up to one-third of the children under five. A contextual analysis of the region undertaken by CRS revealed that limited access to income was the overriding factor that prevented most vulnerable farming households from accessing food, education, healthcare, as well as farm inputs and other services. As a result, in 2003 CRS' West Africa regional office developed a regional agriculture strategy focused on increasing agricultural incomes among the most vulnerable rural households.

### *The Learning Alliance in West Africa*

As part of the regional agriculture strategy, in January 2003 CRS West Africa conducted an initial training workshop to expose staff to key basic agricultural marketing techniques. While important and useful, this training was only a first step towards building capacity, maintaining a lasting impact, and facilitating learning over time. After participating in the launch of the CRS Global Learning Alliance workshop in January 2005, the CRS West Africa countries decided that the learning alliance approach for agroenterprise development could serve as an important new approach to strengthening and combining food and financial security. Accordingly, regional and country staff designed a two-year program to build skills that would more cohesively impact the livelihoods of project participants by increasing both productivity and incomes.

Over the period 2005–2007, the learning alliance in West Africa concluded a cycle of four workshops following the roadmap outlined in Figure 1. Participants came from CRS programs in Burkina Faso, the Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Sierra Leone; the Democratic Republic of the Congo from CRS' Central Africa region also participated. Benin started but withdrew after three workshops.

The West Africa region's experience and success with the learning alliance approach can be attributed to strong regional commitment and support to agroenterprise development, a well-defined regional income-led agriculture strategy that provided a guiding framework, and country programs with a keen interest in promoting agriculture as part of their respective strategies. As an illustration of the support received from country programs, the four workshops were hosted by different CRS country offices: Niger, the Gambia, Senegal, and Burkina Faso. Combined with the respective national governments' commitment

to address rural poverty, the learning alliance forum clearly created an enabling environment for learning and capacity building.

A unique aspect of the West Africa learning alliance was that it provided a forum for anglophone and francophone project managers to meet on a regular basis to share and discuss experiences and lessons. While conducting workshops in two languages posed logistical challenges and meant that learning went at a slower pace, the effort was appreciated by participants as a means of strengthening relationships between countries and solidarity in the region.

### *Outcomes of the Learning Alliance*

Program results and successes, new growth opportunities and the momentum built through the learning alliance activities have helped country programs and partners throughout the region make the shift from subsistence to market-led production in order to reduce poverty.

Progress has been uneven. Ghana, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Sierra Leone have successfully undertaken all of the agroenterprise roadmap steps. Liberia, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Senegal are at the market chain analysis stage; the Gambia and Mali have progressed more slowly, with financial and human resources being limiting factors. A total of 15 agroenterprise projects are underway, of which six are existing projects in which the agroenterprise methods have been retrofitted and nine are new projects. Market chains that are being developed include sesame (4), cowpea (2), groundnut (1), cassava (3), vegetables (3), palm oil (1) and small animal fattening (1). In some countries, integration of agroenterprise development with other CRS program areas is very evident, in particular microfinance, natural resource management, education and health.

The reputation of CRS and its partners in the region is improving as a result of the consolidated learning alliance activities and visibility this brings to the programs.

**I feel confident in discussing agroenterprise development with other people. I see myself as a focal point in agroenterprise development in CRS Ghana.**

*Steven Awitti Kuffour, CRS Ghana*

The step-by-step process promoted at the learning alliance level has enabled participants to apply skills and learning practically and build capacity among target farmers. Thanks to the solid skill set and clear approach, farmers have been able to understand and adopt skills and improved marketing practices.

**More farmers are eager to be members of farmers' groups just after a successful marketing season. Farmers have seen the need for collective marketing of their products to attract distance and large-scale buyers. They have also seen the need to focus on producing products that have demand and now appreciate the importance of maintaining quality standards and adding value to their products to attract premium price.**

*Moses Aduku, FOSADEF, DDO Navrongo-Bolgatanga, Ghana*

At the country and local level, the learning alliance has been instrumental in building stronger relationships among CRS staff, implementing partners and other stakeholders, such as input suppliers, credit and loan providers, processors, traders, transporters, and communications companies. The staff have become more aware of their facilitating role in agroenterprise development and the critical role played by business development service providers.

Challenges found in the learning alliance included the high level of staff turnover. Of the 34 persons that attended learning alliance workshops, 16 (47%) attended three or four workshops. But only eight of these 16 are now still active with CRS; another two are from partner institutions and one has moved to another job with CRS in Southern Africa.

The learning alliance approach has significantly contributed to the success of several new growth initiatives in West Africa. Country programs such as Liberia, Mali, Niger and Sierra Leone were able to secure significant Title II funding from USAID with agroenterprise components. Likewise, the cowpea value chain work in Burkina Faso has attracted interest from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In Mali, following the 2004–2005 locust/drought disaster, CRS was able to win a grant also from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to implement a postdisaster recovery project integrating the agroenterprise and livelihood resiliency approaches. Other growth has been made possible through integration of savings groups and water programming funded by the Howard G. Buffet Foundation. Overall, the initiatives strengthened through the learning alliance have helped position the West Africa programs for more strategic and effective fundraising. At the beneficiary level, most CRS and partners staff feel more confident and enthusiastic about responding to new growth opportunities.

**Our country program is now confident to participate in more growth opportunities. We get more consideration from our local USAID mission which strongly believes in market-led agriculture.**

*Mousa Sangare, CRS Mali*

## **BRINGING AGROENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT TO REMOTE COMMUNITIES OF SOUTHEAST ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

TERRY TUASON, CRS PHILIPPINES

The dynamism of Southeast Asian national economies, reduced civil conflicts, and a strong policy framework have resulted in unprecedented reductions in poverty and remarkable improvements in the standard of living across the region. While overall poverty has been reduced, there are still as many as a third of the total population living under the poverty line. Poverty among rural populations is much worse than for urban dwellers. These rural populations, which are the focus of CRS' attention, tend to be in isolated upland dry areas and along degraded coasts, where farmers rely on subsistence agriculture.

The CRS Southeast Asia and Pacific Region Office has agriculture and natural resources management programming in five countries: Cambodia, Timor-Leste, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam. Over the past two decades, these programs have supported poor farmers through the introduction of improved production technologies and the formation of farmer groups. Most projects have been implemented through local partners. The programs are implemented within differing contexts, such as nonirrigated drylands and hillsides in Indonesia, emergency response and livelihoods recovery in Timor-Leste, cross-border marketing and trade in Cambodia, and a natural resource management approach inclusive of land tenure and governance in the Philippines and Vietnam.

### *The Learning Alliance Story*

In 2004, the country offices began to explore and integrate marketing and agroenterprise elements into their agriculture programs, building on local initiatives to engage in markets. Following the Global Learning Alliance workshop held in East Africa in 2005, the regional office took a strategic decision to adopt the agroenterprise approach. A series of learning alliance workshops were conducted over the course of 2 years, beginning in June 2005 in the Philippines, followed by a second in Cambodia in March 2006 and a third in Indonesia in November 2006. The primary goal of the workshops was to introduce and build capacity and understanding of the concepts, principles and steps in the road map (Figure 1). This enabled the country programs to rapidly refocus the existing agriculture programs towards market-led production. The emphasis on market orientation, agroenterprise and the business aspects of farming are now accepted as important features of the regional strategy of CRS agriculture programs in the region.

### *Added Value of the Regional Agroenterprise Learning Alliance*

In the past there have been many successes in the Southeast Asia and Pacific region's programs resulting from technical assistance and improved agricultural technology, and broader application of the livelihoods approach. Through the learning alliance, CRS and its implementing partners have come to appreciate that they needed to engage the private sector as well as government stakeholders to deepen the impact of results. Some of these organizations include corporations, supermarkets, wholesale stall owners, consolidators, food processors, and other supply chain actors.

Participants from throughout the region saw the learning alliance workshops as valuable opportunities to learn and adopt the agroenterprise approach in a relatively short time. The improved knowledge of both staff and partners has resulted in increased credibility for CRS and its partners among donors and peers in agroenterprise programming across the region. The CRS staff in the Philippines took the initiative to document what they had learned and prepare their own good practice guide for agroenterprise development with emphasis on farmer organization, and secured funding for its publication from USAID.<sup>6</sup> The learning alliances not only provided new knowledge and skills, but also promoted solidarity among CRS staff and partners throughout the region, with high value attached by participants to the opportunity of sharing experiences and learning from each other.

Table 2 summarizes the accomplishments of the participating countries in the Learning Alliance. All countries have made significant progress in all steps of the agroenterprise roadmap. As can be appreciated, the selection of products on which to work was heavily biased toward higher value products, particularly fruits and vegetables, which reflects the socioeconomic position of these countries.

### *Challenges*

Since 2004 CRS in Southeast Asia has implemented agroenterprise activities valued at more than \$9.5 million through several programs funded primarily through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, USAID, Cordaid, and private foundations. The program continues to rely on these primary sources of funding, although funding levels are decreasing. This poses a challenge to the region in terms of being able to continue support the agroenterprise groups as well as maintaining the capacity built through the learning alliance.

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<sup>6</sup> CRS Philippines, *The Clustering Approach to Agroenterprise Development for Small Farmers*.

**Table 3. Major accomplishments of the agroenterprise learning alliance in Southeast Asia and the Pacific**

Country	Products selected	Market chain studies	Agroenterprise projects developed	Business development services strengthened or developed
Vietnam	Chili, spring onion, cabbage, tomato, squash, watermelon	8 product chains: chili, spring onion, cabbage, tomato, squash, watermelon, pineapple, dairy	7 projects: chili, spring onion, cabbage, tomato, squash, watermelon, pineapple	Government technical institutions participated in training and capacity activities
Cambodia	Green leaf vegetables, fish, pigs, chicken, rice, mango	5 product chains: mango, pigs, chicken, bunching onion, morning glory	3 projects: morning glory, fish-rice system, small animal raising	Fish fingerling hatcheries and nurseries, fruit tree nurseries, animal health service providers, pig breeders, agricultural input suppliers, and local vegetable traders
Timor-Leste	Candlenut	1 product chain: candlenut (Indonesia linkage)	3 projects: collective marketing, community paddy rice production, candlenut nurseries	Not yet undertaken
Indonesia	Tomato, potato, chili, shallot, cabbage, organic rice, duck eggs, groundnut, candlenut, cashew nut, tamarind, corn, ginger, instant carrot drink, dried sliced ginger and kaempferia, rubber	7 product chains: duck eggs, groundnut, cashew nut, candlenut, corn, ginger, rubber	9 projects: organic rice, potato seed, duck eggs and rice, carrot instant drink and dried sliced ginger/kaempferia, ginger and rubber, mungbean and soybean, groundnut and mungbean, tamarind and groundnut, candlenut and copra	Local NGOs' role as business development service provided free for farmers
Philippines	Calamansi, coffee, corn, strawberry, rice, abaca, livestock (swine), dried fish (fresh water), and handicrafts	10 product chains: calamansi, coffee, corn (2x), strawberry, rice, abaca, swine, dried fish (freshwater), and handicrafts.	Calamansi (fresh and processed), coffee, rice (organic), dried fish (freshwater), handicraft, bulb and leafy onions, vegetables (carrots, squash, bitter gourd, assorted temperate vegetables), swine	Supermarket consolidators; wet markets, food processors; exporters, fast food chains, establishment of alternative market outlets (roadside market), working with mentors from corporate groups

## LEARNING FROM AGROENTERPRISE PROJECTS IN SOUTH ASIA

KAMAL BHATTACHARYYA, CRS AFGHANISTAN, WITH SUPPORT FROM DOMINIQUE MOREL, SEBASTIAN CAZENAVE, SUNIL VISHWAKARMA AND SANDRINE CHETAIL

South Asia has more than 500 million people who earn less than \$1 a day: the largest number of poor in the world. A significant number of these are landless people or small-scale or marginal landholders living on less than 2 hectares. Typical landholdings among this population are becoming even smaller due to high population growth. Like the inhabitants of many other developing regions, they also face frequent natural disasters, such as floods, drought and earthquakes, and in some areas, conflict. All of these present challenges in terms of building farm households' resilience to shocks and creating pathways out of poverty.

The majority of CRS beneficiaries are food-insecure farmers. When selling goods and services in the market they are unable to negotiate for premium prices due to an inadequate understanding of the marketing system and limited access to market information. Poor and marginalized farmers find it difficult to stock, market, and distribute agricultural input and outputs. Moreover, farmers face the challenges of how to diversify their product portfolio, how to add value to their goods, and how to organize themselves to scale up their marketing endeavors.

In the South Asia region, CRS is active in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and some central Asian countries. At this stage agroenterprise programs are being implemented in Afghanistan and India only.

### *The Learning Alliance Story*

CRS Afghanistan began agroenterprise activities in April 2004. The initial activities were followed by two formal training courses conducted by CIAT. Since then, CRS and partner staff have also visited enterprise programs in other CRS regions, conducted study tours, and continued to interact with other colleagues also working on agroenterprise development.

In CRS India the learning alliance activities began through implementing soil and water conservation and watershed programs and, in response to a partner demand, to focus more on increasing incomes through market-led agriculture. In India, three modules of agroenterprise learning alliance trainings have taken place. The first introductory training was held in June 2006. Subsequent trainings were conducted in October 2007 and April 2008. Between these trainings, staff initiated field activities.

The shift in focus toward market-led agriculture in both Afghanistan and India also coincided with a donor focus on agricultural marketing. In 2005 the CRS South Asia



office included agroenterprise as a key strategic focus in the regional strategy, which has helped guide implementation and promote the agroenterprise approach.

### *Mutual Learning from South Asia's Involvement in Agroenterprise Development*

The agroenterprise projects in South Asia have been successful in using and adapting the agroenterprise training tools to the local context. A key requirement has been the need to provide intense training and additional assistance to the most food-insecure farmers over a longer period of time.

On the other hand, other CRS country programs are learning from the successful promotion of self-help groups in India. These groups have proven highly effective in building resilience and bringing social change to some of the poorest communities. Self-help groups are community-based organizations with three main purposes:

- To provide a social benefit to the group and communities
- To provide a mechanism for income generation and support for group members through internal savings and lending
- To empower the group members

In 2004 the CRS staff study tour, mentioned in the section on East Africa, included visits to watershed areas in India. The participants observed that strong, cohesive self-help groups served as a solid building block for agroenterprise development and other livelihoods skills. In India a self-help group federation has been established with strong linkages to banks. This savings opportunity is proving to be a key asset in the financing of agroenterprise activities.

### *Monitoring and Evaluation of Agroenterprise*

CRS Afghanistan has established a robust monitoring and evaluation system managed by qualified staff, and supported by government staff and technical consultants. CRS India has also established a management information system for the agroenterprise projects that has helped the program provide better information on results to donors. These are two additional examples of good practices that could be adopted by other country programs to allow timely decision making on the performance of agroenterprise interventions.

### *Value Added of the Regional Agroenterprise Learning Alliance*

The agroenterprise learning alliance trainings and activities were instrumental in providing a forum for conceptual clarity among participants as the program focus shifted from production to market-led agriculture. Additionally, the agroenterprise approach requires a new set of skills. The alliance helped build these skills through focused trainings and experiential learning and sharing at periodic intervals.

Program achievements made due to the learning alliance results in increased linkages with donors (see below) and research organizations.

### *The Learning Alliance Growth Environment*

Since CRS Afghanistan and India have shifted their strategic approach to market-led agriculture, both programs have attracted significant funds for agroenterprise from several donors, including USAID, the British Department for International Development (DFID), and the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development. CRS Afghanistan is implementing a multi-year public-private partnership agroenterprise program with funding from USAID. CRS India has won a rainfed *rabi* (winter) cropping project from DFID's Research Into Use program for promoting the rice and chickpea value chain.

In addition, some of CRS India's partners, such as the Jabalpur Diocese Social Service Society in Madhya Pradesh and the Diocese of Berhampur in Orissa, have initiated agroenterprise activities among self-help groups. One federation of self-help groups founded a cooperative bank and has established linkages with the formal banking system. The federation has accumulated \$250,000 over the last few years. This example demonstrates that self-help groups are well positioned to manage funds and to attract additional funds for skills building. Studies are now being done to evaluate the possibilities of self-help groups using their funds to support agroenterprise activities.

# What Worked Well in the Learning Alliances

A number of common features stand out across the five CRS regions that have experimented with the learning alliance approach. These are the things that worked well and have helped CRS work more effectively and efficiently:

- Shared learning environment
- Paradigm shift
- Creating substantial program growth
- Core skills
- Direction and discipline
- Diversified partnerships

## Shared Learning Environment

The regional agroenterprise learning alliances have connected CRS and its partners not only within but also between CRS regions. This was possibly because the regional alliances were open, and country programs could participate without restriction: so, Madagascar (part of the CRS Southern Africa region) joined in the East Africa alliance, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Central Africa) in the West Africa alliance.

In West Africa, the learning alliance enabled participants from anglophone (Gambia, Ghana, Liberia, Sierra Leone) and francophone (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal) countries to overcome their language barriers and work as a close team, sharing experiences, learning and practicing new techniques required for promoting agroenterprise development. In East Africa the alliance has built a “community of practice” on a foundation of trust and friendship. This community of practice continues to share information and learning and is leading the way in the development of a next-generation learning alliance for the region.

The experience with establishing virtual learning communities has been variable. The Central America learning alliance invested significantly in the establishment and day-to-day management of a website ([www.alianzasdeaprendizaje.org](http://www.alianzasdeaprendizaje.org)) which has seen

steady growth in numbers of visitors. However, information flow remains largely one-way, with partners accessing information but providing little if any input.

Dgroups: Development through Dialogue, which offers online tools and services for sharing knowledge among development practitioners worldwide ([www.dgroups.org](http://www.dgroups.org)), is also available to learning alliance participants in Central America, East Africa and South and South East Asia. That online community has been somewhat more effective in generating dialogue among partners, but still tends to be used only when a participant needs something in particular.

It seems, then, that while Internet-based tools are important for accessing knowledge and information, face-to-face interactions remain critical to building trust and effectively managing and using that knowledge and information (Box 4).

#### **Box 4. Documenting agroenterprise experiences—the Philippines leads the way**

CRS Philippines adapted CIAT’s territorial approach to rural agroenterprise to fit the particular circumstances of the project sites in its five target provinces in Mindanao, integrating a rapid market assessment process with community-wide participatory action research.

In September 2005 and March 2006, CRS sponsored learning alliance workshops in Mindanao in which farmer leaders, traders, NGO staff, local government officials, CRS staff and other groups and individuals came together and shared their experiences and insights on marketing and agroenterprise. Drawing on that experience, and using the workshop methodology, CRS Philippines published a facilitator’s manual: *The Clustering Approach to Agroenterprise Development for Small Farmers: The CRS-Philippines Experience*. This is informed by and tailored to conditions in the region, and aims to help market facilitators and other service providers through a participatory process of involving small-scale farmer groups and local entrepreneurs identify market opportunities and develop viable, sustainable agroenterprises.

Lastly, the learning alliance has deepened and broadened the partnership between CRS and CIAT. That relationship, a pioneering development agency–international research center collaboration, has provided a model for other new CRS partnerships: with the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture in the Great Lakes Cassava Initiative, and with the International Potato Center, the International Rice Research Institute and the Africa Rice Center, among others. These global and regional partnerships in turn are helping encourage similar collaborations with national agricultural research institutes, such as the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research, the Institut de l’environnement

et des recherches agricoles (INERA) in Burkina Faso, and the Savannah Agriculture Research Institute in Ghana. To increase our links with the private sector CRS has also joined the Sustainable Food Lab, which is a forum where representatives of the nonprofit, private, and public sectors meet to discuss challenges and find common solutions.

## Paradigm Shift

By the end of the 1990s, CRS staff in Latin America, East Africa, and Southeast Asia had begun to see that concentrating solely on improving yields for small farmers would leave them mired in perpetual poverty, as agriculture-based livelihoods became increasingly uncompetitive in a dynamic, market-based, global economy.

The decision to commit to an agroenterprise learning alliance with CIAT was largely founded on that realization. In places where the learning alliance has been most active, CRS agriculture programming has undergone a radical change. Where formerly our attention was narrowly focused on a low-input/low-output, subsistence farming-oriented approach to food security, now CRS programs integrate the goal of enabling small producers to enter competitive markets by identifying market opportunities, strengthening rural enterprise, and converting poorly coordinated supply chains into value chains. Many learning alliance participants sum up this change by saying that they are helping farmers transition from “struggling to sell what they have produced, to producing what sells.”

This paradigm shift has also influenced the agency as a whole, as agroenterprise is now integrated into regional and country-level strategic plans around the world.

## Creating Substantial Program Growth

Donor priorities have been shifting toward market-led approaches to reducing poverty at the same time as their emphasis on private sector partnerships to increase overall funding support has been growing. At their best, CRS agroenterprise projects developed with the aid of the learning alliance in this changing policy environment have embodied creative thinking, critical reflection, and targeted research carried out synergistically with partner organizations.

The response to reductions in Title II programming provides a good illustration. The reduction in the number of countries served by Title II programs means that CRS will have to find alternative sources of funding for its program activities. The agroenterprise approach provides it with a new avenue to do so.

## Core Skills

One of the major successes of the learning alliance approach has been that the systematic investigation into improving methodologies led to a dramatic advance in how we work with farmer groups.

Up until that point, almost all the farmer training undertaken by CRS and its partners dealt with a single skill set: for example, how to increase production of a particular commodity, or basic business and marketing skills. CRS and CIAT came to understand that self-sustaining growth and development of farmers requires multiple sets of skills. The learning alliance partners also realized that these skill sets required the integration of several sectors (e.g., microfinance, agriculture, water, and enterprise development). This realization is transforming the way that CRS engages with farmer groups in South and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

This development can be traced back to a study tour in 2005 by members of the learning alliance to investigate factors that enhance the success of farmer groups (Box 5). The participants' encounter with self-help groups in India was particularly enlightening. Groups that were successfully implementing a savings-led microfinance approach were trying to use their new capital to invest in business opportunities, such as growing and selling vegetables. Invariably when they did so, the need for better technologies and techniques to improve productivity and profits became immediately evident. As many of these groups were connected to watershed management projects and relied on improved water resources for their enterprises (e.g., to provide a steady source of clean water for irrigation), they were also aware of the need for better management of natural resources. So they had a felt demand for skills in a range of areas that included (i) group organization, (ii) savings and financial management, (iii) business and marketing, (iv) technology and innovation, and (v) natural resource management.

The principal factors that led to this significant advance in understanding and practice was that the learning alliance brought together a critical mass of interested scientists and development specialists with different technical backgrounds to study an important question of common interest.

### **Box 5. Learning from experience across continents brings instant benefits**

To address the need for a coherent integrated approach to linking poor farmers to markets, in 2005 CRS and CIAT embarked on a study tour of three countries: Bolivia, Uganda, and India. The tour produced the insights behind the Multi-Skill Farmer Group Approach, and also provided an unanticipated benefit to the CRS India agriculture team.

When the tour reached India, the CRS country office there was winding down a successful watershed management program that had been active in more than 300 watersheds in central India, protecting and enhancing natural capital by regeneration and conservation. Among the project's results were increased crop yields, partly due to the increase in area brought under double cropping. Support for self-help groups had been integrated into the watershed program, as a means of providing development assistance to socially excluded groups, especially women. Through their thrift and credit initiatives, these self-help groups had amassed a total savings of \$15.6 million, and their activities built important social as well as financial capital. But it was increasingly clear that their agroenterprise initiatives too frequently produced discouraging results.

The study tour's arrival in India coincided with the country program's emerging realization that self-help groups needed better support in agroenterprise planning and management. It was a turning point for the CRS India program, which soon after launched a South Asia agroenterprise learning alliance that includes most of the Indian states in which CRS works, and is integrating agroenterprise concepts into its agriculture and self-help group programs.

## **Direction and Discipline**

The agroenterprise learning alliance has brought direction and discipline to CRS' agricultural programming, and has strengthened the agency's professionalism. The roadmap provides clear directions on how to do agroenterprise, starting with the identification and characterization of a territory and proceeding through the establishment of an interest group to guide the process, identification of potential market opportunities, rigorous analysis of selected market chains, design of agroenterprise activities, and implementation—including linking to essential business services. This roadmap comes with clear directions on how to navigate the agroenterprise process, and detailed but simple instructions on how to carry out each of the tasks. Of course

not everyone starts from exactly the same place; the process is flexible enough to accommodate differing circumstances, but the clear direction and guidance it provides sets useful standards and helps things to go well.

Agreeing to participate in the learning alliance comes with a commitment to learn and to use that learning in agricultural development programming. Agroenterprise is not just one more task among many. Rather, it is the conceptual lens through which CRS now sees its work in agriculture. Participants commit to applying the set of agroenterprise practices in their work, while learning alliance trainers and facilitators agree to support participants and ensure that they apply the learning effectively.

## **Diversified Partnership**

Catholic Church partners are active participants in the agroenterprise learning alliance. The alliance also expands the scope of our partnership activities along the value chain. Communities, farm families, and farmer groups remain at the center of the development process, and helping them achieve food and financial security by linking to markets is the overarching goal.

Partnerships with research institutions have taken on a new importance, especially with CIAT, CRS' principal partner in the alliance, but also with other international and national institutions. These partners contribute knowledge and techniques: for example, the World Agroforestry Centre provides support to forestry product enterprise in the Philippines, the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics plays a role in chickpea projects in Tanzania, and the International Rice Research Institute supports rice in the Philippines.

Successful agroenterprise requires strong partnership ties to government, civil society, and the private sector. In every agroenterprise activity, CRS collaborates closely—albeit often informally—with the extension services of national ministries of agriculture. Specialist NGOs, such as Oxfam in India and TechnoServe in Kenya, offer much-needed support. Private-sector institutions like the National Bank for Rural Development in India or LAFISE in Nicaragua provide essential business services. Other private-sector organizations are direct players in the market: examples include Jollibee in the Philippines, Wal-Mart in Nicaragua, ACOS in Ethiopia, and the Export Trading Company in Tanzania. Nontraditional donors are increasingly important to agroenterprise: examples include the Department for International Development's Research into Use Project in India, and the Japan International Cooperation Agency in the Philippines. Local and international links to the private sector are also being strengthened through membership in forums such as the Sustainable Food Lab, which brings together NGOs, research organizations, universities,



and corporations interested in integrating smallholder farms with the market. Lastly, universities and technology centers such as the Cornell University, the International Fertilizer Development Center, and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization play central roles.

The learning alliance creates the space for these complex partnerships, first in the agroenterprise interest group, then later in specific commodity groups. This facilitates enterprise expansion and long-term sustainability.

### **Box 6. Agroenterprise development diversifies partnerships**

CRS has built a reputation in the Philippines as a pioneer in agroenterprise development. CRS Philippine's innovative "clustering approach," which has had tremendous on-the-ground success with small farmers, has spurred partnering requests from a variety of different agencies, corporations, and research institutions whose development agendas and interests in corporate social responsibility coincide with CRS' aims. Currently, CRS' agroenterprise efforts in the Philippines benefit from ongoing partnerships with or funding support from the Jollibee Food Corporation (the biggest chain of fast-food stores in the Philippines), the Philippines National Livelihood Development Corporation, the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, Curtin University of Technology, the University of New South Wales, the Australia Center for International Agricultural Research, and the University of the Philippines in Mindanao.



# Capitalizing on Investment: The Challenges Ahead

While the regions have experienced multiple successes in agroenterprise activities, multiple challenges also arose during implementation. These challenges need to be confronted in a systematic way for CRS to grow into and consolidate a position of industry leadership in pro-poor agroenterprise development.

## Staff Capacity and Retention

Many CRS and partner staff trained in agroenterprise development in regional and country learning alliances have moved on to new positions in the middle of implementing the process. Two key reasons for poor staff retention include a lack of continuous funding for agroenterprise programs and better opportunities in other organizations or businesses. High staff turnover, and the need to recruit and train new staff, results in costly and inefficient programs, slows down the pace of program implementation, and reduces cost-efficiency. They have resulted in a lack of continuity of skills building and support for other CRS and partner staff, and most of all for program beneficiaries.

Training staff on the multiple skill sets essential for agroenterprise development is a long-term process and a significant investment for the agency. Retaining highly skilled and experienced staff is extremely important for CRS to become a leader in pro-poor agroenterprise program development. Moreover, agroenterprise development is a new discipline for CRS; hence retaining the trained staff is vital. Proactive leadership of qualified agroenterprise program managers and technical advisers will ensure that CRS builds a reputation as an industry leader, and increases the capacity for continued growth efforts, including fundraising, representation, technical proposal writing, documentation, and learning about program impact.

In the second phase of the agroenterprise alliance, efforts will be made to improve recruitment, retention, and incentives so that CRS can retain highly qualified staff and increase efficiency and effectiveness of agroenterprise programs. Developing a growth strategy and assisting country programs and regions with linking

program quality, results, and growth opportunities primarily for longer-term, multi-year programs will be a key component.

The learning alliance will also develop a certified agroenterprise trainer program that will help build skills and expand knowledge among CRS programs, as well as provide an opportunity for professional growth of qualified staff. These efforts will increase job security and professional growth opportunities for existing and new staff. The alliance will also foster leadership and support for agroenterprise at the country program, regional, and agency levels.

## **Robust Management Information Systems and Monitoring and Evaluation**

Since the inception of the agroenterprise learning alliance, programs have invested a great deal and focused primarily on establishing the implementation plans and steps, building up a solid program base, and establishing a forum for learning. Less focus has been on monitoring and evaluation systems, especially at a regional level. Now that CRS has a broad base of programs that are established and growing, there is an increased need and demand to develop much more robust monitoring and evaluation systems that will show the full impact on the livelihoods of the people the agency serves, as well as provide solid results to show donors and advocate for more funding.

The second phase of agroenterprise will invest in developing more robust monitoring and evaluation systems. Some proposed strategies include:

- Develop a simple, coherent, transparent, objective, and systematic **minimum dataset** that can be used in most country contexts among CRS staff, partners, beneficiaries, and donors. Minimum data should be presented uniformly and used to inform not only country programs, but also impact across regions. There may also be a series of sub-datasets that would capture information on gender mainstreaming, resource mobilization, improved access to food and social services, such as health and education, water and sanitation, etc. This would enable agroenterprise programs to measure the full impact of increased income on household livelihoods security.
- Develop or adapt existing **manuals and tools** that will best serve the needs of all stakeholders. A typical example is the facilitator manual produced by CRS Philippines on the *Clustering Approach to Agroenterprise Development for Small Farmers*.
- Invest in improved **learning strategies** that will enhance e-learning and sharing of documents and dialogue using web-based services. CRS Learns,

the CRS intranet, and the CRS Agilix GoCourses are all opportunities for facilitating this process.

- Strengthening **participatory monitoring and evaluation systems** is another strategy for increasing impact, ownership, and incentive at the partner and beneficiary level.

CRS will take immediate steps to develop these strategies by setting up an ad-hoc committee that will include CRS management, donors, program managers, technical advisers, beneficiaries, and other value chain stakeholders. This committee led by CRS will start working on establishing a minimum data set.

## Policy and Advocacy

In undertaking agroenterprise development with local institutions and farmers, the importance of policies and regulatory frameworks that support rather than hinder business initiatives becomes increasingly evident. They are also vital for achieving sustainability and an ability to scale out successful outcomes from one area to others. Through successful implementation of area-based agroenterprise development CRS and its local partners gradually build up a stock of knowledge and experiences that allows them to identify limitations and bottlenecks to agroenterprise development caused by imperfect policies and regulatory frameworks. These policy-related issues play themselves out at the local (micro), institutional (meso) and national and global policy (macro) levels. CRS is at present best positioned to influence policy decisions relevant to the operation of local development projects at the micro and meso level. In the future, as CRS “reputational capital” increases, we will look to play a more active role in contributing to international debates on trade and economic policy that affect the access of developing countries products to developed country markets.

So too, as the regional agroenterprise learning alliances mature, strengthen and engage with a wide range of stakeholders, CRS has an opportunity to engage more in advocacy and policy at the regional level. The thrust of CRS policy and advocacy engagement is on changing and ensuring that systems and structures—research, development and policy—are pro-poor and help facilitate farmer linkage to markets and agroenterprise profitability.

In Africa, for example, the consensus and commitment that African development must be led by Africans has resulted in the establishment of strong and vibrant organizations in markets, research and development. As CRS starts new alliances in Southern and Central Africa and expands capacity in West and East Africa (see next section, “The Way Forward”), it has a unique opportunity to engage with these key actors. This might include:

- Joining CORAF/WECARD (West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development) and ASARECA (Association of Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa) as they expand their mandates to embrace a market approach that links research and development—CRS can help ensure that technologies are appropriate and poor farmers have access to them.
- Participation in and representation of poor farm families with Lusaka-based COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa), Bangui-based CEMAC (Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa) and Abuja-based ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) economic forums—bringing a civil society voice to the table.
- Participation in and support to NEPAD (New Partnership for Africa’s Development) and FARA (Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa) at the all-Africa level. This will help CRS to engage with a range of important organizations in Africa such as the Nairobi- and Accra-based AGRA (Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa).
- Participation in GFAR (Global Forum on Agricultural Research) and the CGIAR (Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research) as they reorganize and attempt to engage civil society and the private sector. GFAR can assist CRS in connecting with IFAP (International Federation of Agricultural Producers) and through IFAP with regional and national farmer unions.
- Engaging with donors active in agricultural policy such as Interaction, USAID, and the World Bank.

Through the Global Agroenterprise Learning Alliance, CRS needs to articulate a coherent strategy for agroenterprise policy and advocacy and a common approach for engaging stakeholders. The learning alliance needs to work closely with other individuals and departments in CRS engaged in policy discussions. The strategy should explain what specific skills are needed, who will represent, who the agency wants to engage with and what its objectives are. CRS needs to ensure that its engagement is effective. It needs to be recognized that policy and advocacy engagement is complex and time consuming, but that it can pay an important role in successfully linking farmers to markets and ensuring that CRS has an effective pro-poor voice in important policy deliberations.

## **Growth and Sustainability**

The CIAT-CRS agroenterprise learning alliance has been a significant success culminating in the agency commitment and the inclusion of an agriculture and income pillar in the CRS agriculture and environment strategy. The first

agroenterprise learning alliance phase has influenced the way that CRS does business and there are indications of a solid return on investment. Nevertheless a growth and sustainability strategy needs to be built into the second phase.

### **CRS COMMITMENT AND SUPPORT**

In regions and country programs that have important agricultural programs, agroenterprise needs to be incorporated into country and regional strategies. Country representatives and heads of programming need to have a solid understanding of agroenterprise and provide effective support to agroenterprise staff. This might include support for the recruitment of new staff, training support for staff to attend learning alliance events and the recognition of agroenterprise performance.

### **DEMONSTRATING AGROENTERPRISE EFFECTIVENESS AND EFFICIENCY**

The foundation of the sustained growth of agroenterprise in CRS is the demonstrated effectiveness of the approach as a pathway for poor farm families out of poverty. The methodology needs to show a proven feasibility and significant impact at the household level, including gender-biased effects, and it must scale effectively. At the agency level, the agroenterprise approach should resonate with communities and donors and show a solid return on investment.

### **FUNDING AND GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES**

**USAID Title II Food for Peace.** Agroenterprise and Title II have become inextricably linked. Though the number of CRS Title II programs has shrunk and the future of funding is unsure, it remains an important foundation for agriculture—especially in Africa, where CRS has integrated agricultural activities that include agroenterprise in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in West Africa, Burundi in Central Africa, Ethiopia and Sudan in East Africa, and Zambia, Malawi, and Madagascar in Southern Africa. CRS can use these eleven Title II programs to go to scale in agroenterprise, demonstrate how agroenterprise can be integrated with other sectors via the multi-skill farmer group approach and engage with governments and donors on pro-poor policy issues.

CRS' success in maintaining agroenterprise capacity and programming with the close of Title II programming is a mix of success (Kenya, Nicaragua, Uganda, Philippines) and failure (Senegal, Ghana). Though transitioning the agency's Title II programs is challenging, there is evidence that it is feasible.

**USAID Global Development Alliance (GDA).** CRS' track record with GDAs is not particularly strong, but one high point is the success of the Nicaraguan GDA, which has brought together a number of NGOs, farmer cooperatives, and private sector organizations to link smallholder farmers to growth markets. This project is working on a range of value chains and is gaining momentum in terms of employment and sales of local produce. CRS can learn from this experience to develop similar GDA opportunities. In Uganda, the recently won Lead project also offers opportunities to use local private sector alliances to link farmers to more formal markets.

**Foundations.** It is clear that agroenterprise resonates with major U.S. foundations such as Howard G. Buffett and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. These two foundations concur that agroenterprise is an effective pathway out of poverty for millions of poor farm families. The second agroenterprise learning alliance phase needs to maintain a strategic vision on first implementing successful value chain projects, and then documenting and sharing results and learning widely. Working closely with the CRS Foundations and Corporations unit, the agroenterprise team needs to connect with other large foundations as well.

**Working with major gift officers and major donors.** Agroenterprise also resonates with CRS private donors in a way that sustainable agriculture was not able to do. This is because private donors have built and own successful businesses and relate to agroenterprise as an investment with a promising return in helping farm families begin the long climb out of poverty.

There are numerous examples of major donors supporting specific value chains. For example, the Ryan Foundation is supporting chickpea in Tanzania. Efforts continue to attract support for cowpea in West Africa and for the sweet potato and banana value chains in Central Africa.

In order to grow and sustain agroenterprise in CRS, the agency needs to:

- Improve its agroenterprise approach through the design of the second phase
- Increase country program and partner capacity to implement successful projects
- Demonstrate that it is both effective and efficient in helping move farm families out of poverty
- Document successes and learning and engage with the donor community—public and private—to access support to continue to go to scale

## **Continuous Management and Facilitation Support**

Upward of 30 CRS country programs are actively involved in agroenterprise development activities and have engaged in the learning alliance. Among these 30



programs there are high performing ones that have embraced the agroenterprise approach energetically and are progressing significantly. The great majority of programs are advancing more steadily, while there are a few whose progress has been slow; three have dropped out for one reason or another.

A number of factors influence the pace at which a program can proceed and performance in the field. Those programs that have had continuous management and facilitation support with strong local teams are those that have had the most significant results. The “good practices” that have been observed to be common across these high performing programs and that have contributed to their success are:

- Buy-in from senior management and ensured financial resources to be able to put into practice what has been learned
- A full-time and committed learning alliance manager and team who are empowered by their superiors to move the process forward
- A learning alliance plan that clearly articulates what needs to be learned and the timetable for achieving results
- The presence of an internal CRS support team to ensure that communication is fluid, documentation and interchange is ongoing and momentum is maintained
- Investment in in-house mentoring, monitoring and evaluation of agroenterprise projects that are managed as learning processes for those involved
- Flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances and what is being learned through experience in the field and from the experiences of others



# The Way Forward

How is CRS going to apply the learning alliance approach in the future?

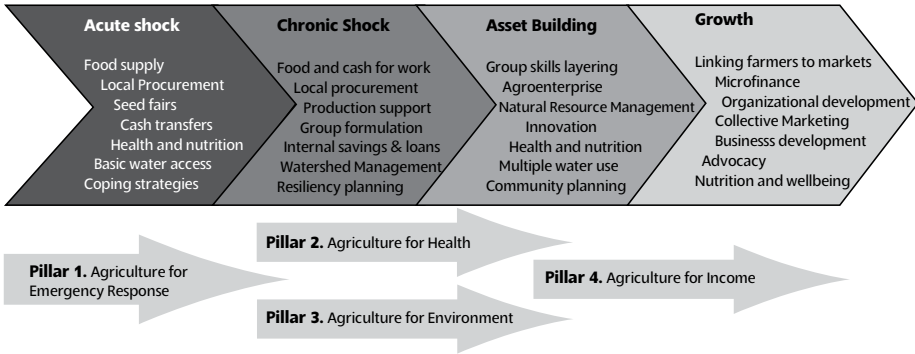
The members of CRS' agroenterprise "community" feel confident that they are on the right track in having moved away from a production-oriented approach to agricultural development. While satisfied with the progress that has been made, the community members recognize that they can do many things better. This last section of this book pulls together the main areas that require attention over the next few years if CRS is to fully consolidate its incipient skills in facilitating agroenterprise development processes.

## **Agriculture through an Agroenterprise Lens**

The new agriculture and environment strategy clearly leads CRS toward agriculture as a vehicle for generating income for smallholder farmers (Figure 3).<sup>7</sup> The pathway out of poverty for farming families is one in which they balance household food production for nutrition and health with the production of crops and livestock to generate a cash income. Looking at agricultural development through an agroenterprise lens means being aware that the market dictates what can be sold successfully by small farmers, and that to take on this challenge farmers need to build their entrepreneurial skills. But these are additional and complementary skills to a farmer's main objective: to produce crops and livestock in a profitable and sustainable manner. So CRS' longstanding commitment and expertise on production and managing natural resources as a means to achieving food security for the poor are maintained and strengthened as an integral part of this strategy.

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<sup>7</sup> CRS, *Agriculture and Environment Strategy, 2008-2013*.



**Figure 3. Sequencing of the components of CRS' agricultural development strategy, 2008–2013**

## The Multi-Skill Farmer Group Approach

Within the new strategy, the multi-skill group approach has emerged as a clear framework for CRS' interventions to help resource poor farmers engage with markets. The five skills are:

- The ability to organize democratically for collective decision-making
- The ability to manage finances through saving and lending
- The ability to select, establish, and grow an enterprise
- The ability to manage natural resources as the basis on which to build a sustainable enterprise
- The ability to innovate and thereby maintain competitiveness

CRS' expertise and experience in handling capacity building for these skills has been largely individual, skill by skill, with little integration among the skills. Collaborating with colleagues in other CRS programs and other research and development institutions, the agroenterprise group will pursue vigorously the improvement and further testing of this conceptual and methodological framework. This requires:

- A deepening of the ability to form strong farmer business organizations
- A continuing and closer relation between agriculture and microfinance teams
- Further refinement of the agency's watershed approaches to incorporate the territorial aspects of the agroenterprise approach
- Learning from successes and failures to collective and bulk marketing of smallholder products
- Learning about how to build local capacity to innovate in situations where public and private services are absent or weak

## The CRS Agroenterprise Development Cycle

The past five years of using the learning alliance process to build capacity in agroenterprise development—through learning and putting into practice what has been learned—has spawned CRS’ own approach to agroenterprise development adapted to our needs and those of our partners. While maintaining many of the elements of the original “roadmap” (Figure 1), the CRS agroenterprise development cycle (Figure 4) includes more steps and provides more detail in the areas of farmer group formation, financing, collective marketing, scaling and monitoring and evaluation.

The cycle has five steps. The first step, getting organized, involves deciding where to start the agroenterprise intervention, who to work with, and what product(s) to work on. The second step, enterprise design, guides farmer groups in designing and piloting an enterprise. They build on the information and organization established in Step 1. The third step, marketing, deals with three elements that are critical in helping link farmers to markets: financing and business links, collective marketing, innovation, and value addition. The fourth step, scaling up, looks at the factors that affect how far and how fast agroenterprise development experiences can be scaled up. The last step, learning and sharing, emphasizes the importance of establishing ongoing monitoring processes that allow CRS and its partners to evaluate changes in target communities, analyze and learn from the experiences gained, and to share with a wider audience what has or has not been achieved and why.

The Agroenterprise Development Cycle is a product of CRS’ involvement in the Learning Alliance and is fully explained in the companion to this book, *Getting to Market: From Agriculture to Agroenterprise*. The agroenterprise cycle is a work in progress. New elements will be incorporated and existing components revised. In the future, it is conceivable that other steps or sub-steps may be necessary, for example assessing health and nutrition status, reviewing disaster resilience, assessing watershed potential, and building public-private partnerships. CRS aims to update and adapt the cycle as the agroenterprise teams gain new knowledge and understanding of how agroenterprise development works for the poor.

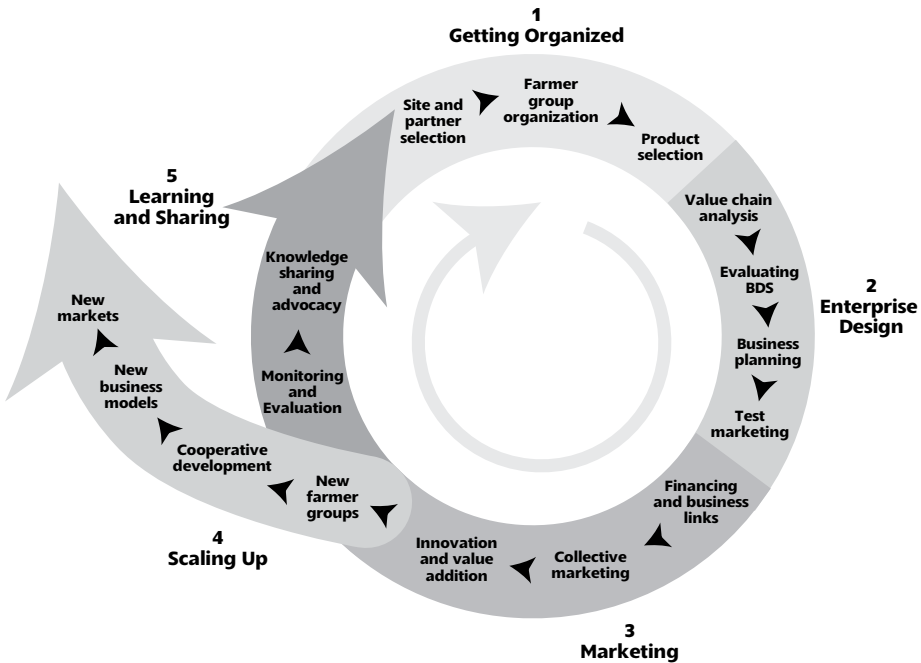


Figure 4. CRS' agroenterprise development cycle

## The Learning Alliance Concept: A Flexible Platform

### EXPANDING BOUNDARIES

Operational economies and synergy can be achieved by breaching artificial boundaries between CRS' regions, especially where needs and demands of country programs are similar. For example, greater effectiveness can be obtained by expanding learning opportunities across these regions:

- **Eastern and Southern Africa.** The first East Africa learning alliance was attended by staff from the Southern Africa region. Integration would build on this, bringing experience and lessons to countries that are initiating agroenterprise development.
- **West and Central Africa.** Staff from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (in CRS' Central Africa region) attended the first West Africa learning alliance cycle, and bilingual participation proved successful and motivating for the participants. Investment in professional simultaneous translation is a warranted expense to build on and expand experience of the West Africa region staff, and further integrate anglophone and francophone countries in these regions.

- **Southeast Asia/Pacific and South Asia.** CRS' regional offices are merging, which creates the opportunity to build on the two regions' contrasting experiences in agroenterprise development.
- **Latin America and the Caribbean.** Central America has been the major focus for CRS' learning alliance involvement. However, agroenterprise development activities are being undertaken in other country programs, and the feasibility of linking with these will be explored.

A cross-boundary approach in itself is a major future challenge. It requires commitment, perseverance and acknowledgement from those involved that the process will require further investment in careful planning and financing. The benefits and costs have to be well articulated, and linked to the common set of issues that each learning platform will address (see the next section).

### **PROVIDING FOCUS AND TAKING ON NEW THEMES**

The rapidly fluctuating world and regional food, energy and financial situation requires flexible responses tailored to the specific needs of each region. The mix of products that have been prioritized in CRS' agroenterprise activities vary from one region to another in response to prevailing market conditions. In consolidating old and initiating new learning alliance processes, it is necessary to take into account how far the uncertain food outlook will affect different regions, and in particular the rural poor. The present global economic crisis, whose gravity was unforeseen 12 months ago, and the longer-term effect of global climate change, are but two factors that future learning processes will need to take into account.

Some current and pipeline projects indicate the way forward, where cross-country and cross-region learning alliance platforms will greatly enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of CRS' work.

These include product-based initiatives such as:

- Cassava, using the Great Lakes Cassava Initiative as the platform
- Rice, as in the CRS/Africa Rice Center Global Rice Learning Alliance
- Pulses, where CRS has current initiatives with navy and other beans, cowpea, chickpea, and soybean
- Fruit and vegetables, which are relevant to all continents, and some of which lend themselves to multi-country learning (for example, potato, tomato and onion under irrigation in Africa)
- Higher-value products such as coffee, cacao and honey, which are being developed as opportunities in more than one continent

CRS is also engaged in non-commodity-specific initiatives. An example is the agency's work on natural resource management and integrated water resource management: the Global Water Initiative, financed by the Howard G. Buffett Foundation, involves nine countries and brings together seven leading international NGOs, including CRS.

## **Delivering Results and Meeting Expectations**

To capitalize on the gains that CRS has made in conceptualizing and developing an agriculture and environment strategy based on a sound analysis of past experience and future demands, the above ideas need to be complemented with a set of operational interventions that will ensure that the agency delivers results, meets expectations and can be accountable for the investments made.

Among the key elements for ensuring success are:

- Heads of programming and agriculture of CRS country programs who are aware of the experiences, benefits and lessons from the agroenterprise development work. This will allow them to position correctly new proposals that incorporate the new concepts and frameworks that have emerged and been tested over the past five years.
- Strong leadership of each learning alliance, with an active global coordinating body that mobilizes the CRS agroenterprise community of practice.
- Human and financial resources necessary for efficient and effective implementation in each learning alliance. These include resources for:
  - Face-to-face meetings for planning, design and evaluation, and workshops for learning, reflection and documentation
  - Follow-up technical support for in-country mentoring, and for monitoring performance of participants
  - Ongoing communication and exchange using virtual “communities of practice”
  - Documentation of experiences and their use for learning and advocacy
  - Monitoring and evaluation of key processes, achievements, and results (in value chains, thematic technical areas, etc.) using minimum data sets supported by information and communication technology; these should be linked to global and regional initiatives for enhancing CRS as a learning institution



## Learning and Institutional Change for Innovation

The Learning Alliance approach has been successfully adopted within CRS' Agriculture and Environment Program where it has brought about significant positive change. It has shown to be an excellent tool for introducing new topics within CRS and to our partner institutions. It has highlighted once again the interdependence of development actors and how, through partnership and collaboration with appropriate research and development actors, real gains can be made in achieving common goals.

The in-house experience that has been achieved in organizing and managing learning alliance processes can be made use of in other programs and sectors. Of particular value will be its use in integrating sectors, where each sector brings knowledge and experience that can develop into innovative solutions to problems that have proved intractable in the past.

Recent world events have put industrialized nations under great economic stress. The repercussions that this will have for developing nations, and especially those with high proportions of rural poor, are hard to quantify. What is sure is that CRS' efforts at helping to meet the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 face huge and perhaps insurmountable barriers. Once again the situation calls for a revitalized partnership among like-minded development practitioners to work together to develop the capacities and abilities of the agency's partners and target beneficiaries so that they can increasingly become agents of the change that they want to see. CRS' adoption of the learning alliance concept is just one step in this direction—where partnership and learning are key elements for improving our performance as an international development agency.



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