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**What makes networks successful?
The example of the Neuchâtel Initiative
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Prelude

Conflict Between Self Interest and the Common Good: - Why Co-operate within a Network?

There is a famous Italian opera known as *TOSCA*. The heroine of the opera, also known as *Tosca*, is faced with a terrible dilemma. Her lover *Cavaradossi* is convicted of a crime he allegedly committed, and is condemned to die by *Scarpia*, the police chief, who also happens to like *Tosca*. But *Scarpia* offered her a deal to save her lover's life. If *Tosca* accepts to sleep with him, he will save *Cavaradossi*'s life by telling the firing squad to use blanks instead of live bullets.

If we were to assume for a moment that they are not hindered by taboo, moral restraint or ethical imperative, both *Tosca* and *Scarpia* would benefit if they stuck to their bargain and co-operate as true egoists: *Tosca* would save her lover's life and *Scarpia* would bed her. But as individuals each would benefit even more if he/she deceived the other into keeping his/her side of the bargain but did not keep his/her own. Thus, *Tosca* would save her lover and virtue, whereas *Scarpia* would get lucky and be rid of his enemy. So did they co-operate or not?

In fact according to the opera each decided to deceive the other. *Tosca* decides to deceive *Scarpia* by agreeing to his request, but stabs him dead after he supposedly gives the order to use blanks. But she discovers to her dismay that she was too late, because *Scarpia* also chose to deceive her by not issuing the order he promised. The firing squad does not use blanks; *Cavaradossi* dies. *Tosca* commits suicide, and all three end up dead. How could it be?

Tosca's dilemma is known as the *Prisoner's Dilemma*¹ in game theory, because the commonest anecdote to illustrate it describes two prisoners each faced with the choice of giving evidence against the other and so reducing his own sentence. The dilemma arises because if neither defects on the other, the police can convict both only on a lesser charge, so both would be better off if they stayed silent, but each is individually better off with an acquittal if he defects.

If this situation were to arise only once, it would be illogical not to defect given the starting conditions. But, as long as the same situation arises between the same pair of individuals (or groups) more than once it was proven in game theory that selfishness was not the rational thing to do after all. Instead, "*tit-for-tat*", whereby individuals start out by co-operating and then doing whatever the other guy did last, but magnanimously overlooking a single defection at random in one-third of the time, is the most successful form of behaviour. What makes such so-called "*generous tit-for-tat*" more successful than other behavioural patterns is its combination of being nice, retaliatory, forgiving, and clear. Its niceness prevents it from getting into unnecessary trouble. Its retaliation discourages the other side from persisting whenever defection is tried. Its forgiveness helps restore mutual co-operation. And its clarity makes it intelligible to others, thereby eliciting long-term co-operation.

Origins of the Neuchâtel Initiative (NI)

¹ See Ridley Matt, 1996. *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Co-operation*. Penguin Books, England.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, agricultural extension systems became a major bone of contention between the main donors and practitioners actively involved in agricultural development in sub-Saharan Africa. There had been a broad consensus among development partners then, as now, that agricultural extension systems could, and do, play a major role in the economic and social development of Africa. But a debate was raging at the time, reaching its climax in the mid-1990s, as to which system was the most suitable for the continent and how the different systems should operate. The main controversies tended to be related to the respective roles of the State and civil society (private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs,) etc.), conceptual differences, the relative importance of extension in supporting overall development goals, the need or otherwise for national extension systems, and financial (cost recovery) issues.

However, the changing context of the 1990s, in particular the spread of democracy, decentralisation, economic liberalisation and across-the-board cuts in official development assistance available to most African states, demonstrated the urgent need for all stakeholders to set aside their differences on dogma and capitalise on the diversity of their approaches. It was also increasingly obvious that unstable political environments, shifting public investment policies, and various other macro (national) and meso (regional) factors beyond the control of the donors and extension agents were putting a lot of pressure on agricultural extension systems. In the light of these trends and in response to them it was imperative that partners and stakeholders involved develop a common vision of how to deal with the changes, which are bound to affect agricultural extension. Subsequently, the *Neuchâtel Initiative on the Analysis of Existing Agricultural Extension Approaches in sub-Saharan Africa* was borne in July 1995 in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, precisely to develop such a common understanding of the issues involved in improving the performance of all types of agricultural extension systems throughout the continent.

Highlights of the First Informal Meeting in Neuchâtel

Objectives and Goals. The objective of the first informal meeting of donors interested in supporting agricultural extension systems in sub-Saharan Africa was to break the ice between the key players and identify key issues relevant to the development of sustainable extension systems in the continent. The priority was put on finding common grounds for joint activities rather than on pinpointing variations in the different approaches and their underlying philosophies. It was hoped that an open non-confrontational and non-threatening discussion of the key relevant issues affecting extension would lead to a better understanding of the various approaches supported by different donors and help identify a limited number of activities where donors could join forces.

Participation. In the light of the fact that the heated debate in the mid-1990s concerning extension approaches was in fact mainly between the donor communities, they were the ones who sought a rapprochement. Therefore, only interested donors were invited and eventually attended this first informal consultation on international support to agricultural extension systems in Africa. There were a total of 25 participants from both bilateral and multilateral donor agencies heavily involved in supporting agricultural extension in Africa during the 1980s and 1990s. The 16 representatives from bilateral assistance agencies came from Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and United States of America. And three multilateral agencies were also represented, namely FAO, IFAD, and the World Bank.

In addition to sending the largest number of representatives, Switzerland also provided the services of a facilitator from the Swiss Centre for Agricultural Extension, based in

Lindau, whose innovative facilitation technique and service was credited with contributing substantially to the success of the workshop.

The papers presented at the meeting looked at extension related issues from various angles including: (a) tasks and functions of agricultural services, which included a discussion on the then little known, but now famous, *Extension Elephant and Extension Butterfly* accredited to the LBL; (b) future policies of the World Bank on agricultural extension; (c) lessons learnt from implementation of T&V in the extension system in Ghana; (d) production & technology transfer in agricultural extension in Burkina Faso; and (e) agricultural extension and rural development: the experience of the French development co-operation, which represented a sample of experiences of those donors supporting systems parallel to the T&V systems.

Main Conclusions and Agreements Reached. All participants expressed deep satisfaction with the conclusions of the informal consultation, the nature of which allowed them to discard their various “organisational hats” and discuss openly and frankly the important issues and themes related to agricultural extension in Africa in the 1990s. Representatives from all participating institutions committed themselves to at least one joint action to be undertaken in the coming months and years with other partners. In addition, and most importantly, there was a broad consensus on some important issues, which had been quite controversial before the meeting, including the following:

- (a) African countries must, themselves, own and govern the agricultural extension systems and approaches being supported by donors. By countries here is meant all local and in-country stakeholders involved in agricultural extension;
- (b) External support should be offered under co-ordinated long-term programmes rather than isolated, narrow & short-term projects;
- (c) Extension systems and approaches should be evaluated and judged based on concrete results in the field, including quality technical messages, farm and co-operative management counselling, and effective exchange of produce market information and knowledge about resource management practices, etc.;
- (d) Donors should support the replacement of expatriate managers by competent Africans through training of local staff, with due emphasis put on the training of women for all levels of extension management and field work; and
- (e) Support for donor co-ordination through a broad-based national and regional co-ordination mechanism involving public institutions and civil society.

At the end of what turned out to be a fruitful meeting for the donor community, all participants agreed to continue the dialogue initiated, thus, through future joint activities. And IFAD volunteered to host the next informal consultation at its headquarters in Rome during the second half of 1996. Thus, the Neuchâtel Initiative was borne almost accidentally based on the principles of “*generous tit-for-tat*” that is proving a formidable tool in sharing knowledge for the regeneration and re-growth of agricultural extension systems in Africa.

Evolution of the NI Over Time

The Neuchâtel Initiative started as a conflict resolution venture. What makes it different from most such endeavours is that this time it was those who were in conflict that took the initiative, themselves, to establish dialogue and remove conflict between them. Over time the initiative evolved into an informal network of individual agricultural extension professionals and policy advisors from the concerned donor community. Their involvement in the network is supported financially and morally encouraged by their parent organisations, who want to reap the benefits of the *think-tank effect* of the network without being unduly committed and bound by the NI's recommendations. A closer look at the evolution of the network over the eight years since its creation, three phases in its life could be identified so far, namely: (a) **1995-1998**: constructing a network; (b) **1998-2000**: building a common vision together; (c) **2000-present**: generating and sharing relevant knowledge. The main characteristics and achievements of these three phases are briefly discussed during the presentation and in the original paper in English.

Current Status of the Network and Factors for its Success

The current status of the network is above all a quite healthy one. After eight years of continuous dialogue and constructive consultation, the group has succeeded in replacing confrontation with generation and sharing of relevant knowledge to all members of the NI. The mere fact that most NI members made serious efforts to meet several times a year, quite apart from the general annual gatherings open to all members, was an indication of how seriously they take the opportunities offered by the network. This was further highlighted by the fact that the members made constant informal contacts through emails, faxes or simply dropping in on members present a location that the other member was passing through on some other business. Also the willingness with which members informally sought out to bring back into the fold those who were wavering is a noteworthy feature of the network.

All these various channels of communication have resulted into a much more collegial atmosphere among donors involved in supporting agricultural extension services in Africa. The fear of the other has disappeared and **pluralism** of approaches of extension support has become less threatening and wasteful of resources. Instead of competing uselessly, different donors now seek ways of making their different approaches complementary, with each approach being promoted purely on merit in a given situation. So far the *generous tit-for-tat* behavioural pattern in game theory has been played out successfully with no need for bringing into play the need to magnanimously overlook any random defections. Some of the **main characteristics of the NI network that may explain its relative success** up to this point may be summarised as follows.

- (a) Combination of an informal non-threatening setting, with some channels of re-entering formal arrangements when appropriate. In particular, while donors fund the participation of their staff in the deliberations of the NI gatherings, the inputs of these members are driven purely by individual drive and personal interest. Yet, although recommendations from NI consultations are, thus, not binding on parent organisations of its members, it is clear management in the latter do keep a keen eye on the proceedings of the group for injecting new knowledge into their corporate institutional memory and building channels of communications with other like minded institutions for developing joint ventures;
- (b) No shortage of themes that unite members around the table, the investigative research and analysis around which are both rewarding intellectually for the individuals engaged in the network, and are simultaneously useful for the parent

institutions in that the findings and recommendations can feed directly into their operations and project pipelines;

- (c) Existence of a core membership, comprising 3 multilateral agencies (FAO, IFAD, and WB) and 5 bilateral agencies (DFID, FBC, GTZ, SDC, and SIDA), with very clear manageable objectives and overall goals, with the option of enlarging the debates to other stakeholders when necessary to get their feedback on issues of common interest;
- (d) A steady, committed, silent, and non-intrusive facilitator (LBL) that has no obvious direct benefit to gain for itself from the success of the network other than the efficiency and effectiveness of co-ordinated international support for agricultural extension services in Africa. They facilitated each and every informal NI consultation since 1995 and there is evidence to support the observation that the overall success of the network is due in no small measure to their effective facilitation function.

These characteristics are in no specific order of importance and nor are they exclusive. But they do indicate that much can be achieved with rather simple truths and efforts.

Concluding Remarks on Some Basic Principles of Networking

All stakeholders in any society - governments, donors, civil society, especially farmers/producers and their organisations, etc. - in pursuing their day-to-day tasks have a de facto role in contributing towards the development of the community. And in no other endeavour is there a more pressing need to develop ways of sharing good practice, building the enabling environment, and developing skills and capabilities at all levels in:

- (a) Understanding the potential of and case for partnership;
- (b) Overcoming suspicions of and gaining respect for different partners;
- (c) Obtaining the skills for working in partnership with all stakeholders at local, national and international levels;
- (d) Developing the tools for measuring progress and impact of partnerships; and
- (e) Spreading and scaling up good practices to become the mainstream of development and governance.

These are some of the basic needs that drove concerned stakeholders to create the Neuchâtel Initiative as an informal consultative process on international support to agricultural extension in Africa in July 1995. Like for all good networks the rationale for establishing it was driven by the knowledge of potential and real benefits of partnership which may be summarised as follows:

- (a) *Providing a mechanism* for each partner to bring their own skills, competencies and interests to common problems and opportunities on the basis of competency, legitimacy, and transparency that no single participant has when acting alone;
- (b) *Mobilising more resources* by combining the technical, human, informational, physical and financial resources of all partners;
- (c) *Ensuring greater awareness* of the priorities, needs and roles of each stakeholder, thereby creating a more integrated and stable partnerships;

- (d) *Creating dynamic contact networks* offering channels of influence that on the one hand engage the wider community and on the other impact the policy agenda of participating institutions and entities; and
- (e) *Replacing conflict with co-operation* - for all participants, the cost of conflict is greater, in both time and resources, than co-operation, even though that of co-operation may come less easily to those pursuing a narrow project, deal, new business venture or idea.

The NI succeeded in doing all these and may be more. That was possible largely because in the donor institutions and agencies, as much as in Africa itself, at the beginning of the decade of the 1990s, parallel revolutions in governance started happening and is continuing to this day. That revolution, which emphasises empowerment and joint action based on mutual respect and mutual benefit opened up new opportunities for the informal and decentralised approaches adopted by the NI network. Those approaches rely basically on the skills and visions of individual representatives of public institutions (governments and donor agencies), civil society and farmers organisations who are on the front line of change in their organisations, communities and countries. They are the map makers for the future.

But for these people to succeed there is a need to put in place an appropriate process for planning the actions of, and providing adequate resources for, partnerships to function properly. These include:

- (a) *Deciding what to do*: it took a decade or more before the stakeholders interested in supporting agricultural extension services in Africa decided to consult each other instead of maintaining the conflict situation that prevailed between them throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and reached a climax by the early 1990s;
- (b) *Identifying partners*: it was not until after much trial and error did the NI settle for limiting its core membership to donors but not forgetting other stakeholders;
- (c) *Agreeing on core principles* of equity, which deals with respect (not necessarily equality, which has a connotation of power), transparency (the foundation of trust) and mutual benefit, which is not so easy to agree on unless all stakeholders keep an open mind and are flexible: in the case of the NI these were already agreed by the end of the first inaugural meeting in July 1995;
- (d) *Agreeing on the appropriate format of the relationships* within the partnership: opinions vary on how formal a partnership has to be. Typically most networks or partnerships do not need a formal contract in their early stages, and so far the NI opted for such informality with greater freedom to test out ideas;
- (e) *Setting clear objectives*: originally these may be broad in scope (as was the case for the NI network at its first consultation in Neuchâtel in 1995), but as projects develop the objectives need to be more concrete (similar to the clear tasks given to the two task forces on *financing extension* and *extension, poverty and vulnerability*) at the NI annual meeting in 1999;
- (f) *Engaging other stakeholders* as the NI did in 1998-1999 when it consulted governments, farmers and others in Africa to obtain their reactions on the CF;
- (g) *Planning for action*, as in the annual meetings of the NI, which always ended with an agreement on joint actions to be undertaken in the coming year or so;

(h) *Mobilising resources*; and

(i) *Reviewing and revising*.

From the foregoing the reader should have come full circle through the practice and theory of understanding *what makes networks successful*. It logically leads one to conclude with the definition of what should be an ideal network, which may be summarised as follows:

Partnership is a multi-stakeholder alliance in which individuals, groups or organisations agree to: work together to fulfil an obligation or undertake a specific task; share the risks as well as the benefits; and review the relationship regularly, revising their agreement (formal or informal) as necessary.

It is the submission of this paper that the Neuchâtel Initiative is one such successful network, thus far. And it shows all the necessary characteristics that should enable it remain so, if it keeps on track, for the mutual benefit of its members and other stakeholders impacted by the support for agricultural extension services in Africa and, perhaps, even beyond.

Gr

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SHORT BIOGRAPHY

EDUCATION

After secondary schooling in The Gambia, attended Cranfield University in England (1976-79) and graduated with a *B.Sc. (Honours)* in Agricultural Engineering. Subsequently undertook a postgraduate course in Soil Science and Water Management at the Agricultural University of Wageningen in The Netherlands (1981-83) and graduated with an *M.Sc. (with Distinction)*. Also attended several short courses related to team leadership, management, negotiations, and communications skills enhancement.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Over 19 years of experience in planning, management and supervision of rural development operations in Africa and Asia. Between 1979 and 1981 was deputy head of the Agricultural Engineering Section of the Department of Agriculture in The Gambia and from 1983 to 1987 formed part of the management team of the Jahally & Pacharr Smallholder Rice Irrigation Project in the country. Since 1987 manage the portfolio of the ***International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)*** in several countries (Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Philippines, Sao Tomé & Príncipe, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka) at different times. In addition, served as focal point on a number cross-cutting themes related to IFAD operations including: agricultural extension and access to technology by farmers; research & development of water lifting technologies; land tenure issues; networking with regional West & Central African inter-governmental, non-governmental organisations and farmers' groups.
