Capacity Development for National Agricultural Research Systems: Rethinking USAID's Role

Q & A Transcript

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**Male:** Okay. I’d like to thank our speakers. Now we’re going to open it up for Q and A. As part of the format, please state your name and organization before asking a questions, and we’re going to alternate between our in-person audience and our online audience. So, our online audience is roughly about 75, and for those of you online, our in-person audience is a little over 40, probably 40 – 45 people. So, with that, I’ve been following the conversation online. There’s been quite a rich discussion between people talking about private sector models for supporting NARS work, different other sort of funding models. There was actually a mention of crowdsourcing for – crowd funding for NARS. But with that, let me take a question from online. They’ve been coming in pretty frequently.

**Female:** Yeah, sure. So there were a few questions about the private sector. One was from Arvin Bunker from Weidemann Associates in Missouri who is asking: private sector agricultural research has expanded rapidly, but mostly in OECD countries. Do you anticipate private sector research will soon also expand in developing countries? Why or why not?

**Male:** Anyone want to take that one?

**Male:** I guess I can take that. I think that there’s – there is some room for private sector research. There is certainly a number of breeding companies that are definitely expanding and building, and many efforts are going on to increase capacity for those companies, is ongoing. In many cases, currently, they’re taking material from the CGIAR and testing it, and working with it, and releasing it in their own country. But that will build. I think that that example is one that shows that you get over the inertia and major expenses of getting started, and I think something can build. Some of the more advanced technologies, it’s going to take time.

**Male:** Question in person.

**Question:** Good morning. Ryan Moore from the Agricultural Research Service of USDA. I agree 100 percent with everything the presenters said, but sometimes looking back over 11 years now, some of the issues that we face are beyond what collectively we deem to be good ideas. In the case of the USDA, our authorities come from Congress. So, if we’re trying to impact policies that would enable the NARS in each country to actually function if the political entity in that country – the elected officials are not granting or are not open to the idea of granting funding, authorities, additional policies – at what point, or where would USAID or other donors be able to insert themselves to be able to – despite all these great ideas, how would we actually impact that aspect of any sort of effort to improve the NARS?
Male: Very interesting question, actually. It’s one that I’ve looked at closely in Pakistan recently. But the experience that comes to mind is the link between in Embrapa in Brazil and USDA, where there’s been long-term active sharing of staff resources on both sides, and really bringing the Brazilian system up to full, at least USAID. I mean, USDA speed on cutting edge research. But more generally, if I can also go back to the previous point, I think the state of legislation concerning intellectual property protection is a key aspect that often constrains – at least the way private sector can engage in particular countries, and at least in Pakistan, this is a notable weakness. The legislation has been sitting in various government holes for decades, but it’s still not enacted. Hopefully the new government there will do something about that.

Male: I think that in my experience with respect to some of the areas that revolve around intellectual property, biosafety, regulatory kinds of policy, the countries that I’ve worked in haven’t seemed to – the leaders haven’t seemed to find a way to see the value until they actually have it in-country and see it in-country as to why it matters to them. For the projects that we’ve been involved with, as the project evolves and starts to make progress and gets into the field and closer to what might be approaching the farmers, their leaders actually start to realize: oh, now we see why we need to do this. This is my perception about why they finally start to get engaged. But when they have leadership in their country that understands the areas enough to be able to directly advice their country leaders, I think that makes a big difference. So it’s getting those people in-country well trained that helps to make it work better.

Male: I’ll respond very shortly on it. I have one. There are two dimensions actually in that one questions, and one is the political dimension which is more temporary, if you will. it changes over time. And then there is this other one that is technical, and working for the – that has a longer – more of a longer sustainable sort of optic. The point is, is that relationships count. So if we make relationships with the research institutions and the educational institutions and the universities in a given country, or Cambodia even, then when opportunities come to make – to work in a different way, then we’re prepared with the right relationships in order to have an impact. So, the continued engagement I think is really important to be able to sustain and create – to create and sustain positive relationships on a technical level. When the politics are right, then that’s when you’re able to make movement.

Male: Question from online.

Female: This question comes from __________ from Nigeria NRCRI. What efforts are currently being made to train up and coming researchers, because in their institution, there is a problem with old researchers retiring
without competent successors. Then, Karen Duka from Nkrumah University of Science and Technology followed this up by saying: what were the barriers to building stronger institutions to train students and successors?

_Female:_

We have a few examples actually coming up now. The reason, of course, there was no funds for training for years. There was a lot of funding from USAID, World Bank, Ford Foundation, others in the ‘80s, but that dried up in the ‘90s. There’s quite some new initiatives, new networks out there. But also what we’ve seen in a few countries, which I think is also relevant for other countries is like, for example, in Tanzania at the Department for Research and Development, they’re hiring retired scientists back for one to two year contracts to train the young scientists that have been coming in. We’ve seen it in a few other countries also as an ad hoc solution, but this is also maybe an area where USAID or other donors could see if they can put some funding available for such type of initiatives.

_Question:_

Yeah. ______ of no fixed institutional affiliation. I really commend USAID for this effort. I think it’s really important to get building research capacity at the national level back on the agenda and to follow through with it. So I think it’s a great initiative. I have just two comments, I guess, to follow up on what’s already been said. one, just immediately on the human resources issue. My sense is that, particular in Africa, it’s a much more serious problem than we recognize, and I think Nienke – we need to get beyond just looking at the national research system and look at the wider context of human resources because the market for a Ph.D., or even a master’s in agriculture now is so strong that the national research systems – the public systems – are at the bottom of the barrel in terms of competing for those human resources. You’ve got the ___ expanding like crazy, regional organizations, private sector, and so on. So I think it’d be really good – a couple of countries to look at the much broader human resource situation. The other one is on the institutional change, and I think that we all recognize that’s a really difficult one, that there is windows of opportunity, but the World Bank, ISNAR, and all the others – we’ve spent a lot of time trying to bring about institutional change without many results on the ground. I think that it might be useful as a follow-up activity here to look at some of the success stories of change. I’ve been involved in evaluation of ______ in Uruguay, which is probably ISNAR’s biggest success story. But we’re looking at it 20 years after the fact, and so you really need a long-term perspective, and I think that has implications for Feed the Future. You need a different set of indicators than results on the ground to be able to assess the impacts of institutional change.
Male: I think that’s more of a comment, but since it comes from a fellow Australian, I wanted to say that both Derek and I are American taxpayers. We find it very pleasing that USAID is taking this revisiting seriously of this whole thing that we’re discussing today. So I think, ultimately, it’s another 20 years’ time when we look back on it, we’ll say that, at last, USAID got back into the right business, seriously. I hope it really does work out.

Male: Question from online.

Female: Question comes from Emma Quilligan from the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico. It’s for Nienke. It’s obvious that more must be done to get young, well-trained researchers into NARS to replace the people who are retiring, but Nienke’s slide said that female scientists are severely underrepresented. What, if anything, is being done to ensure that female scientists constitute a greater proportion of this new cohort?

Female: Yeah, actually, we know in a few countries that the data – our country ______ that we’ve produced with – identifying the share of women have been used for promoting more women in agricultural research – recruiting more women. Quite some countries that have policies – quite some institutes that have policies in increasing the share of women. You see also of course – we now also for the first time are collecting student numbers. Quality’s a little bit different across countries, but you see really a very much a higher share of female on the students as well. So there are developments, but it’s taking time. We see increases every time when we collect the data, we see an increase in the share of women in many countries.

Male: I would add that USAID research, we’ve recently had a number of projects that we’ve been sorting through which ones to fund, but are starting to award funding. As part of that process, we very much look at what kind of capacity building and training that they’re doing, and are making sure that as part of their efforts that they are emphasizing training women. So, it’s a given.

Male: Just real quick, some of the – I think the answer to some of that is: it depends on the culture that you’re working in. There’s not maybe a full 100 percent solution for all – for that. But one suggestion that I’ve heard mentioned is making sure that women have a safe place to be and to study, an apparatus through which to do field work. So, there are some barriers that are specific to women who want to enter the agricultural sciences in these countries that we work. So finding ways that are appropriate in that culture and in that environment to help women overcome those – or break down those barriers, if you will by helping with facilities or some sort of
resources, or some sort of sensitivity to how to enable women to access the education first, but the courses, and then also the fieldwork.

Male:

Thank you, Zachary. Rob Bertram, USAID. I just wanted to add to the last couple of comments. Meredith ______ isn’t here this morning, but I know Clara’s involved with this also. It’s the AWARD program – the African Women in Agricultural Research for Development which is something that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and USAID have now supported for a number of years, and it’s very much about developing leadership for women, and it’s very impressive to see what it does for people. But one point I just wanted to mention following up to Bill is one of the things they have found there is that for a lot of women, it needs to start later in a cultural sense. They need to be open to applicants who are perhaps in their mid-30s because earlier on, maybe they’re having children and they don’t want to do this yet. So I think that’s one of the things where you can’t just always treat men and women the same in terms of the applicant pool. The other point on that is that that is unfortunately just focused on Africa. They are starting a new francophone program, I believe, which will expand its relevance in Africa. But frankly, it’s something that we could think about going global with at some point, were we to have the resources. Thank you.

Question:

Thank you very much. My name is Albertha. I work with Path. I have two questions. One is in connection with the study. I don’t know whether you discovered any recommendations or challenges in connection with translating the current results of current research in agricultural – how to translate those results right down to the grassroots level, because most of the results are hanging, and most countries are not even aware of it. So in addition to looking at how do we increase research in agriculture, we also need to look at: how do we translate current results right down to the grassroots level? And also, in connection with the outcomes – the nutritional outcomes, research on nutritional outcomes of some of the agricultural research, did you come across anything on how to improve on this? I was happy to hear about the biotechnology on the cowpea project in Nigeria and Burkina Faso. I don’t know how many of these types of research are going on, and what kinds of recommendations have been made on that. Thank you.

Male:

Thanks. I’ll take a stab at this question. Yes, well, on nutrition, specifically, ag research institutions globally have done a pretty poor job on getting an appropriate nutritional focus in their work. The rut sets in partly through the national agencies that might be involved, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, which really dropped – in spite of this being a part of its mandate when it was set up, it’s really dropped the ball seriously, and is now busy reengaging. At the CG level, IFPRI has now got a very active focus on nutritional aspects. But when you get down to
the national programs where it’s still typically a very weak element, and a lot of people are struggling to try to improve that, particularly with the varying recognition of the importance of infant nutrition to ultimate human development in the first couple of years of life. On the broader question you raised about the tracking of research results reach the ultimate client, this is typically a very weak element of most national systems, that they don’t link up well with the extension system, or with farmer organizations very well. So, it’s a typically a very weak aspect of the governance of national ag research systems. It’s been increasingly recognized as a problem, but progress on addressing that is still rather patchy. I’m sorry, but maybe USAID through its enhanced program might pick up on this aspect. Thanks.

Male: I would add on the nutrition side that that is a focus of the Feed the Future program, and there are certainly many parts that involve NARS – one that I am specifically am aware of is improving legume programs in many countries because legumes are an important crop for nutrition as well as frequently a crop that women are the key players in. There are certainly other aspects of nutrition like livestock and aquaculture that are important that have a lot of NARS partnerships. So, it is a very important thing, and a lot of room for improvements in NARS.

Male: Question from online.

Female: I’m bringing it back to the private sector. Luca Cridelli, a market development expert in Nepal was wondering – actually, there was a lot of conversation on this going online in the chat box, but she asked: it would be good to have some pointers to programs or lessons on how to improve relationships between private sector and NARS. Are there any examples out there you’d like to share?

Male: Better insight, but let me start. In many systems, there’s such a history of mutual mistrust between public and private sectors that it really requires a lot of focused effort by a few champions to actually break the barriers that have – and I’m thinking particular of India as an example where the large public national ag research system took a lot of persuasion that it really should open up its dialog with the emerging private sector. It really took about a decade of aggressive intervention from various people such as modest World Bankers amongst others to try to get people talking to each other and building up some trust. David might have a thought on that, too. No? Okay.

Male: I would add that certainly, a place where some of the breeders that are in the NARS are working closely with some of these emerging and developing and breeding companies. My best example is again in Uganda where the breeders there are, in fact, directly working with companies, and
feeding material to the companies that they can use to sell. It’s selective in certain crops, but it – there is direct interaction there, and it is about trust, and having capabilities that can actually be useful to companies.

Question: I’m Susan Owens. I’m in BFS. We haven’t talked very much about the university NARS linkage. Jock, you mentioned that there are few examples of effective university NARS linkages in developing countries, or I’m not sure what was the range. Do you think that from a donor investment standpoint that it makes a lot of sense to try to build up the capability at the university and in the NARS, and to work on those linkages?

Male: Certainly. What I was probably didn’t argue vigorously enough is that for real sustainable development, you need to get the universities to be really efficiently functional in developing the skills that the rest of the national system can use, and capture that in the human resources that staff – both private and public elements of the system.

Question: The research part. Do you think that it’s important to transform any maybe Sub-Saharan African universities – Cambodian universities into research centers of excellence, as well as the NARS, as we have in many countries?

Male: No, I think that’s the way to go. That’s easier said than done, of course, especially when they’re so underfunded, and they’re so overwhelmed with teaching responsibilities that research is way down the agenda. But I’m sure many countries have some good examples, and maybe Derek can talk about the Uruguayan situation. I thought you might also mention the gender aspects of Uruguay in response to _____ question earlier how the Uruguayans have handled gender in their national system, ‘cause I don’t know, myself. So, yes, I would say – and again, I’m thinking of Pakistan where the Agricultural University of Faisalabad is becoming an increasingly significant element of the national system - not just for training staff, but actually executing its own research program and feeding into the national research agenda.

Question: One quick comment and one question. In Tanzania, of all the Feed the Future focus countries, we have a program there that is dedicated to building research capacity of both the NARS and _______ University. So it’s kind of an interesting – it’s going to be interesting to watch to see what comes out of that. What was my question? It was – oh darn it, it just went out of my head. Anyway, if I think of it I’ll come back, but anyway, if anybody knows more about that program in Tanzania, it’s a significant effort on the part of our mission there, and I think it’s unique in Feed the Future, and it’s led by Ohio State University with five or six other universities and I think ACDI/VOCA. Thanks.
Male: __________ additional comment about, again, Uganda. There’s a number of very close interactions between _____ University and folks in NARO. There are many students that work at NARO in both cassava and banana that I know specifically, but the NARO staff are actually on the committees for these students and they work very closely with the university, and there are university scientists that are working on programs with the NARO staff. again, it’s very variable depending on the specific scientist, but that’s a very good example of where the university has applied areas and scientists that are interested in it and able to work with the research. Unfortunately, there’s an awful lot of examples of universities that have much more academic approach and not very applied. The research doesn’t overlap very well that they’re doing, if they’re doing research at all with some of the NARS efforts and the more applied area.

Male: Further comments, questions? Just as a last sort of wrap-up, so there was a bit of a conversation online talking about whether or not we should model other country’s systems or try and develop other country’s systems similar to the US model of tying together sort of research and extension, and getting the private sector elements on there. What are your thoughts on doing that sort of similar model, or do we think it’s more of a country context in that we need to develop things that more – that are better applied in those regions? Education too, yes.

Male: I think the hidden – the straight answer is: we can’t create US style extension services in these countries. But what is the formula, and what’s the relationship between the private sector, the public sector, and the university, and how that works, and getting information – agricultural information and practices to best practices to farmers? How that works in a particular country? I think we need to find the right formula in each country, but I think the investment required and the results in relation to that investment makes us want to think of newer approaches that are more private sector. What’s the relationship between the private sector and the public sector? is the public sector playing a monitoring governance type of role rather than on-farm type of extension? But it’s very – this is a very hot topic, so I will stop there and say that we need to do some analysis and find the best approach for a specific country – maybe even a specific region of a country, cause there are different trade flows that affect, for example, __________ that don’t – that aren’t present in different parts of Cambodia, or along the Mekong, or over near – yeah.

Male: I think it is a very country-dependent issue. It’s quite variable.

Male: Cool. And with that, I’d like to thank our speakers for joining us today and sharing their knowledge. I’d also like to thank those of you who have joined us here today in the room and online. Those of you who are on the
other side of the globe, I hope you have a good evening. Those going on for the rest of their day, please have a good day. Please take a moment – our impact survey – if the seminars have been useful to you, you’ve found something worthwhile, if you have a story, please share it with us. Bethel is here for those of you in person, if you wanted to talk to her or set up an interview, we’d greatly appreciate it. The resources will be up on Agrilinks, and we’ve had in the conversation a little bit about gender, about ag and nutrition, and about youth employment in agriculture. We have recent events on all of those up on Agrilinks. We did just put up resources on the Gender Global Learning and Evidence Exchange various to the presentations, the ag nutrition – GLEE, as they’re called, is going up soon. We recently had a youth in agriculture Twitter chat that was very active, and we have those resources up on our blog as well. So, thank you very much, and have a good day.

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