

**Learning cycles for out-scaling agricultural and natural resources management
innovations in the MENA region**

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Millions of dollars are spent annually on agricultural research and development, yet poverty continues to persist within rural areas of the developing world. While the root cause of poverty is multifaceted, one partial argument is that useful research does not always reach the poor and the marginalized, or is sometimes of little value in the improvement of livelihoods and quality of life.

Evidence suggests that both development and adoption of contextually relevant technologies (including knowledge) are more likely to be successful when there is a process of continuous learning, jointly undertaken by research organizations, farmers, marketing agents, donors, NGO's, financial service providers, policy makers, and relevant civil society actors. This joint process of learning is defined as a *learning alliance*, when good practices in both research and development are jointly identified, shared, adapted and used to strengthen capacities, improve practices, generate and document development outcomes, identify future research needs and potential areas for further collaboration.

This project has endeavoured to develop contextual and gender sensitive approaches for promoting learning alliances, which can be considered for broad uptake within the MENA region, and which are able to lead to improved livelihoods and quality of life indicators.

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ACRONYMS

AFD	Agence Française de Développement
ANDZOA	Agence Nationale pour le Développement des Zones Oasiennes et de l'Arganier
ARC	Agricultural Research Centre (Egypt)
CAAEE	Central Administration for Agricultural Extension and Environment
CIAT	International Centre for Tropical Agriculture
EFSIC	Egyptian Food Safety Information Centre
CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
ICARDA	International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas
ONCA	Office National du Conseil Agricole

SUMMARY

The general objective of this project was to design, implement and evaluate two learning alliances, in order to enhance innovation in the areas of agricultural production, marketing and value chain development. A more specific objective was to share the concept of a learning alliance with research and developmental organizations, government agencies, farmers, civil society organizations and private entities, as well as to evaluate the potential for broad uptake within the MENA region.

A focus on gender was particularly strong in the Morocco learning alliance, largely due to the nature of commodities represented at the workshop (Argan, Rose, Saffron, Cactus, Olive), and which require significant contribution from the labour of women. With the exception of olive, and to some extent cactus, these commodities are endemic to southwestern Morocco.

Over the course of the first workshop, participants of the Moroccan learning alliance identified four overarching challenges to production and marketing and which were cross cutting among all products represented:

1. Land fragmentation and common property issues;
2. Lack of awareness and information (various facets of illiteracy);
3. Issues related to social organization and cooperative spirit;
4. Issues related to market intermediaries and marketing services

By the end of the second workshop and through discussion and learning, the Moroccan alliance agreed upon a need to identify contextually relevant and effective business (and social organization) models that are applicable to diverse value chains, and a desire to build a common knowledge management platform that is linked to training and dissemination. A wish to institutionalize the alliance in Morocco was expressed, and an offer was made by Agence Nationale pour le Développement des Zones Oasiennes et de l'Arganier (ANDZOA), a government agency, to house the alliance administratively. Based upon a request from participants, ICARDA is facilitating discussions with ANDZOA and towards the drafting of a '*principles of agreement*' for input and acceptance by the Moroccan learning alliance.

From the perspective of research organizations present, the learning alliance approach seems to have worked well in Morocco, in terms of eliciting agreement on common areas of concern, jointly identified through deep analysis, through discussion on matters of immediate priority, and in the identification of potential partners and pathways for addressing concern(s) agreed upon collectively. For producer organizations, civil society representatives and individual farmers in Morocco, this process was a new experience, unlike previous workshops and meetings, where pre-conceived projects are presented for local 'buy in' and towards a scheduled plan for implementation. Significant discussions on issues related to gender were also of interest to participants and may be reflective of a relatively less conservative society that has close ties to Southern Europe.

Gender played less of a role in Egypt, in terms of discussion on production roles, but an interesting role in terms of choice of planted variety (for wheat, rice and tomatoes) and very much based upon taste and ease of preparation. Participants of the first Egypt workshop identified five commodities that were of significant importance to security and livelihoods for poor rural households and for rural women in general: wheat, rice, tomatoes, dates, buffalo milk. In discussing challenges related to production and marketing of these categories, six areas of concern were raised:

1. 'Subsidized' (quasi-government) model of cooperative (producer) organizations that have the potential for elite takeover and leakage of subsidized inputs;
2. Lack of efficient access to quality and quantity of seed and fertilizer;
3. High cost of primary inputs (primarily fertilizer, feed, and credit);
4. Irregular supply of labour at critical times of the agricultural season, and claimed to be partially linked to a negative image of agriculture and poor youth participation;
5. A general lack of efficacy in measures aimed at tackling disease and infestation;
6. Poor packaging options, lack of local processing technology, and limited local storage facilities which, combined, lead to significant post harvest and marketing losses

Not specifically listed, but a topic of significant discussion over the two workshops was the role and efficacy of public agricultural extension services. Lack of trust between public extension officers and farmers was brought up on a number of occasions, and largely due to the image of a public extension officer as an enforcement agent rather than an agent of technical support. An inability to engage with new forms of rural civil society organizations was also brought up as a challenge for public extension. Some argued that public extension also needs to take on a broader role and into aspects of training on nutrition and food safety. To their defense, and in agreeing with the negative characterization, it was noted (in detail) how a significant lack of incentives and bureaucracy prevent public extension officers from effectively providing technical support.

At the end of the second workshop in Cairo, and after significant learning from relevant development projects and civil society movements (through presentation and side meetings), participants in Cairo decided to test three separate approaches for tackling challenges identified. Buoyed by learning from a Lebanese initiative that utilized solar drying techniques and low level processing of tomatoes for sale in the local market, Fayoum governorate participants identified options for how to organize and engage in the local processing of tomatoes, in order to reduce post harvest loss, in diversifying product lines, and in order to improve profitability. New valley farmers identified a need to form an informal NGO that buys dates directly from small farmers and sell them to a factory in close proximity. With a small membership fee, and a modest charge per kilogramme, the NGO will assist small producers to amalgamate their produce, to sell in bulk, and thereby to receive higher prices and immediate cash. In Beheira, artichoke farmers identified an opportunity to upgrade the existing 70 collection centres, in order to improve occupational safety standards for agricultural labourers engaged in processing, predominantly young women, and to engage the Ministry of Health in providing training and information on occupational health and safety. An information campaign aimed at disseminating health benefits from consuming artichokes, and proper preparation techniques, was also discussed as an initiative to be undertaken, and once an appropriate partner is identified.

As in Morocco, the learning alliance process was a new experience and particularly given a history in Egypt of direct government involvement in agricultural production and pricing for a number of commodities. One clear observation was that the public sector is largely unaware of significant changes in rural civil society movements. A second observation is that farmers are in an active search for avenues to address shortages in inputs (quality and quantity) as well as in enhanced access to markets (for both inputs into production and for sale of final product). Based upon discussions at the two workshops, the current system of providing subsidized inputs through quasi-government cooperatives has lost its appeal and effectiveness. A third observation is that the media in Egypt is focussed upon the high (and rising) price of food for consumers in Egypt, without understanding issues that are relevant to domestic production and ability to supply products for the local market. Calls for the Minister of Supply to intervene and to fix prices for basic staples do not resonate with examples of tomatoes rotting in the field, and as a (claimed) result of high transportation costs and low prices offered to farmers. Nor do these calls sit well when one hears of how women

farmers sell their limited amounts of buffalo milk, in order to pay their child's education, and with complete understanding of a trade-off between nutrition and tuition.

The Egyptian learning alliance clearly identified agricultural policy in Egypt as a constraint to production and marketing, and a need to find private measures to enhance agricultural productivity and marketing. In asking a question of why the Egyptian alliance did not previously pursue the initiatives thought of during the 2nd two day workshop, one answer provided was that ideas emerged over the two workshops, and that discussions and sharing of experiences sparked creativity. From this perspective, the learning alliance initiative would seem to have worked well in Egypt.

Despite successful outcomes from Morocco and Egypt, an overarching question of whether the learning alliance approach is amenable to broad uptake in the MENA region is still open. Time will tell, and an answer to that question will depend very much upon how the two alliances in Morocco and Egypt move forward with their initiatives, what type of support they will receive in the short to medium term, and whether the challenges identified are mitigated through the initiatives identified. Monitoring their progress over time, and learning from their decisions (or inaction) will be of significant value for both research and development policy, and in answering the question of broad applicability.

PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION & OUTPUTS:

1. On the basis of a meeting on February 12th in Cairo between Hammou Lamrani (IDRC), Aden Aw-Hassan (ICARDA), Michael Devlin (ICARDA) and Mark Lundy (CIAT), a decision was made to concentrate upon Morocco, in lieu of Jordan, and to retain Egypt as a second geographical location for conducting the learning alliances;
2. Agadir, in southwestern Morocco, was chosen as the site for holding the Moroccan component of this learning alliance initiative:
 - Two (two-day) workshops were held at the Palais des Roses hotel in Agadir on June 3 - 4 and September 16 – 17;
 - 36 individuals representing 10 domestic organizations, 5 government agencies, 2 national universities, 2 CGIAR centres, the national agricultural research system (INRA), 2 civil society organizations and private farmers participated in the two Morocco workshops;
 - 2 detailed reports synthesizing discussions over the course of two workshops;
 - Research proposal submitted to (and accepted by) International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) to fund a study in Morocco, based upon learning from the 1st Morocco workshop, and entitled “Understanding gender dimensions of high value commodity chains in Southwestern Morocco” (*forthcoming: study scheduled to be completed by December 31st*);
 - Abstract submitted to the European Agricultural Economics Association seminar series to be held in Perugia, Italy on December 12th and 13th has been accepted for presentation, and is based upon learning from the two Morocco workshops
3. Significant challenges were faced in choosing dates for the first Egypt workshop in Cairo, due to instability, and particularly in relation to the deposing of President Morsi in early July. The month of Ramadan also posed contextual challenges for holding workshops in Egypt, and particularly so, given continued demonstrations and sit-ins over the months of July and August. IDRC’s willingness to grant two extensions to this project enabled an undertaking of the Egypt component of this learning alliance initiative, and despite challenges, with much success:
 - Two (two-day) workshops were held in Cairo at the Amaranti Hotel (September 23 – 24) and at Golden Tulip – Flamenco (October 23 -24);
 - 30 individuals representing 4 international organizations, 3 civil society organizations, 4 governmental agencies, 1 private enterprise, American University of Cairo (Desert Development Centre), ICARDA and private farmers from Fayoum, Beheira and Aswan;
 - 2 detailed reports synthesizing discussions over the course of two workshops;
 - 3 diagnostic value chain studies on tomatoes, dates and buffalo milk - products identified by participants as important for rural households in Egypt and for women within these households (*forthcoming: initial results presented at second workshop, with final output expected by December 31st*);

- Qualitative study on rural farm organizations in Egypt, and lessons learned from different approaches to social organization (*forthcoming: initial results presented at second workshop, with final output expected by December 31st*);
 - A “Research to Action” report will be prepared by ICARDA to promote lessons learned from the Cairo workshops and policy recommendations that stem from this learning (*Forthcoming and expected December 31st*)
4. Project brochures were created for this initiative in both Arabic and English, and disseminated to workshop participants, as well as stakeholders that were contacted in the period between workshops. These are available in both print versions as well as PDF versions (*Included as part of this submission*);
 5. A policy summary and report, stemming from the Learning Alliance initiative in both Morocco and Egypt is in production and will be disseminated electronically and in hard copy (*forthcoming: expected by the middle of December*)

OUTCOMES

Two levels of outcomes were envisioned at the end of this project:

Grassroots level:

Partners in both Morocco and Egypt develop approaches, tools and a methodology for tackling a mutually significant challenge that they have identified as common to all of their sectors and commodities. Through collaborative learning, partners initiate a process for future learning alliances that lead to significant improvements in any or all of a number of indicators including, but not limited to: social cohesion, gendered empowerment, environmental sustainability, improved marketing margins, livelihoods and quality of life more broadly.

One significant outcome from the Moroccan learning alliance was a consensus among members to work collaboratively on the building of a common knowledge platform and to link this to training, dissemination of best practices and new knowledge. Individual farmers and cooperative representatives also expressed a desire for an institution that can provide them with voice, and additionally, to foster an understanding that poverty and marginalization in southwestern Morocco continues to exist. This reality, in their opinion, has been masked by an image of lucrative production of high value commodities being produced in the region and exported to foreign markets.

A knowledge based institution, managed by the alliance, and through its potential ability to provide voice, would also tackle a significant concern raised by participants, and related to the question of whether the benefits of the Morocco Green Plan will reach poor, marginalized and isolated communities. Where the alliance will be housed, operating structure, and issues of sustainability are questions that now require attention. ANDZOA has offered its institution as a host for the alliance and members of the alliance have requested ICARDA to facilitate discussions regarding an agreement with ANDZOA. Initial discussions have taken place between ICARDA and ANDZOA on this matter, and further discussions are planned for November, in order to draft a ‘*principles for agreement*’ document that can be presented to members of the alliance for their input and ultimate approval.

While knowledge acquisition and dissemination was an important component of discussions in Egypt, access to markets (contacts, infrastructure), issues of governance within existing quasi-government cooperative structures, lack of effective technical support, and access to quality and quantity seeds and fertilizer were of primary concern to all participants, and across all commodities and regions. Through facilitated discussion, as well as in side meetings and at coffee breaks, participants discussed personal experiences in their own governorates and shared experiences on how certain challenges were tackled or, despite many attempts, those which continue to persist. By the end of the second workshop, participants of the learning alliance in Cairo had made a decision to test various ‘new’ models of social organization, in order to reduce post harvest losses and to improve profit margins through diversified products and better marketing channels. In Fayoum and Beheira governorates, preliminary discussions were held with participating extension service personnel, who provided support in assisting with the process of certification for locally processed products (Fayoum) and towards measures for enhancing occupational health and safety measures (Beheira) for agricultural labourers (predominantly women) in the artichoke sector.

National and Regional level:

Through proof of concept, governments in collaboration with donors, international development agencies, NGO's, farmer groups, and civil society organizations are encouraged to invest in long term programmes that aim (in the long run) to mainstream principles espoused by the learning alliance framework in the MENA region; and specifically with the aim of attaining critical mass in the adoption of technology and best practices (jointly conceived) which result in significant impact upon poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, and improved quality of life indicators. In the case of the latter, this would necessarily include improved incomes and livelihoods, empowerment of women, and improved health and educational indicators for women and children in their early years.

Early indication from Morocco is that there is great interest in working with, and through the learning alliance for testing approaches and technologies that are able to improve agricultural production potential, enhance marketing margins, and ultimately to reduce poverty. Faculty from Hassan II University and Mohamed V University, ANDZOA and ONCA actively participated in both workshops and have expressed a desire in helping to foster the learning alliance approach, which they see as complementary to (i) the underpinnings of Morocco Green Plan, (ii) ANDZOA's specific mission, and (iii) the current repositioning of agricultural extension services in Morocco. Contact has also been made with *Agence Française de Développement* (AFD) and interest has been expressed in holding initial discussions during the month of November, and around a potential for collaborative partnerships to support this initiative.

In Egypt, the directorate of CAAEE (Central Administration for Agricultural Extension and Environment) has expressed significant interest in testing approaches for how to ‘retool’ agricultural extension services in Egypt, such that the agency is more responsive to the needs of new rural civil society organizations that are forming in Egypt. Present for all sessions, the director of CAAEE has acknowledged shortcomings of agricultural extension in Egypt, engaged in discussions with members of the alliance, and is actively seeking collaboration and partnership in finding avenues to promote the efficacy of agricultural extension services in Egypt. Along similar lines, the director of EFSIC (Egyptian Food Safety Information Centre) was actively engaged in discussions during the first workshop and has raised an interest in seeking avenues for how to broaden the scope of extension services to include training on nutrition (particularly for mothers and children) and on food safety. Taken together, considerable scope exists for engaging Egyptian institutions for collaboration in building upon lessons learned from these workshops and developing contextually relevant innovation systems that tackle a number of cross cutting issues related to poverty, malnutrition, agricultural productivity and marketing.

OVERALL ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

Timing:

Timing and political instability were critical factors in fostering the quality of discussions and reporting. Given relative stability in Morocco and flexibility (though somewhat dictated by the month of Ramadan) a period of 10 weeks between the two workshops was an ideal period for gathering background information, validating perspectives raised during the first workshop, and defining areas for facilitated discussion in the second workshop.

In Egypt, a decision to hold the first workshop in late September was made during the first week of September, and on the basis of an assessment regarding stability and security. The second workshop was planned for October 23rd and left little time for analysis, field work and validation of perspectives and information gathered during the first workshop. A project closing date of October 31st necessitated that the 2nd workshop be completed at least one week prior to closing, and in order to file necessary reports. While we consider the Egypt workshops to be successful, in terms of outputs and outcomes, the (relative) quality of reporting suffers from a lack of time and in comparison to the Morocco reports.

It would be beneficial, and of significant benefit to quality of reporting, if the submission of technical reports can be delivered at least 2 weeks after the closing of the project, and in order to reflect upon project outcomes and learning. This is particularly true when activities continue into the last week of the project cycle.

Participant selection:

In both Morocco and Egypt, ICARDA relied upon local professional interlocutors (recommended by IDRC) to arrange participant lists for invitation to the first workshop. While providing excellent professional support, and as specialists in their field, invitations were not unbiased. In Morocco, a significant number of participants to the first workshop were engaged with the 'Learning Route' supported by KariaNet in Morocco. In one sense, this is positive, as previous contact between participants may explain some of the success for the learning alliance in Morocco. From a research oriented perspective, there was limited participation from farmers who were not on the 'learning route' and thus the potential for bias in perspectives uncovered and reported against. In Egypt, short time frames for invitation, and security issues related to domestic travel influenced the choice of participants to the first Egypt workshop, which was heavily skewed towards retired ARC directors, senior administrators and a limited number of farmers. In both Egypt and Morocco, second workshops included invitations of other stakeholders that were identified during visits to the field (in the period between workshops) and reflected a much broader cross section of the agricultural community. In raising this issue, no negative image should be portrayed to the interlocutors, who acted professionally and understandably given the circumstances, and in view of an approach that has not (ostensibly) been tested in the MENA region previously.

For any future learning alliance, one recommendation is that a scoping mission be conducted at least 6 weeks prior to the first workshop, in order to select participants for invitation, through field visits, and on the basis of representativeness (for which criteria should be defined). Project cycles should incorporate this into their timeframes.

Budgets:

A requirement to exhaust all funds prior to closing does not sit well with the learning alliance approach. Follow up is a key component, as exhibited by the need to initiate dialogue in Morocco for formalizing and housing the developing alliance, and in Egypt for following up on the three initiatives that have been tentatively drawn up by the participants. Documenting their activities, successes and challenges in the first month after the second workshop provides important insights and knowledge, and is of equal importance to outcomes achieved. ICARDA's ability to raise funds to undertake a study in Morocco, and based upon learning from the 1st workshop alleviates this drawback, but in Egypt, resources are required to follow up (from a research for development perspective) on the initiatives contemplated by the learning alliance.

An allocation of funds to be utilized for follow up and documentation after the end of project cycle would be of significant value in understanding how decisions are made by participants, what challenges are faced in undertaking activities contemplated, and whether initiatives formulated are actually undertaken.

Sustainability:

IDRC is requested to consider future funding opportunities in order to support these alliances to maturity, to learn from their growth, and to foster broad uptake of other alliances in Morocco and Egypt through facilitation, and on the basis of continued learning and adaption. This continued support would be leveraged by existing investments made by IDRC in funding the initial pilot for testing proof of concept of the learning alliance in Morocco and Egypt, as well as previous and current research investments undertaken by ICARDA in the region, and within Morocco and Egypt more generally.

LIST OF ITEMS SUBMITTED:

1. Morocco workshop report (Part 1/2)
2. Morocco workshop report (Part 2/2)
3. Egypt workshop report (Part 1/2)
4. Egypt workshop report (Part 2/2)
5. Research proposal submitted to and accepted by IFPRI
6. Abstract submitted and approved for presentation at EAEA seminar in Perugia, Italy
7. Project brochure – English version
8. Project brochure – Arabic version