

INNOVATION EMERGES FROM PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract. *‘Transfer of Technology’ is out, ‘Partnership’ is in, when it comes to programmes for stimulating innovations in agriculture and beyond. New practices are no longer seen as the result of research findings that found their way to end users, thanks to the efforts of extension agents or advisors. Farmers, researchers, intermediate actors, and also other stakeholders such as policy makers, funding agencies, actors in the value chain and civil society groups are supposed to be partners involved in processes of co-creation that lead to innovations that are relevant for all.*

Can it really work? How can we know it works? In production or trade you can keep the producer or supplier accountable for what he promises to deliver. But how do you value the contribution of each individual partner for what has been created together, without knowing beforehand what this result will be?

My statement is that it takes a mind shift to understand what partnership entails, both from the partners themselves and the enabling community that creates the conditions in which partnerships can flourish.

The Dutch agricultural system has shown an impressive growth in the decades after the Second World War. Knowledge as played a pivotal role in this development, making the Dutch farmers the most productive entrepreneurs in agriculture worldwide. After the privatisation of the public extension service in 1990 the good relationships of the partners in the system became seriously disturbed. While working at the knowledge department of the Ministry of Agriculture in those days, I made a PhD study on the changing role of government in the agricultural knowledge system. My conclusion was that networks, which had been crucial in the old system, were broken up in the new era of neo-liberal market relationships, with negative effects.

It appeared helpful to look at human systems as living organisms that can be more or less healthy. With this approach I engaged in applied research projects on networks for innovations at farm level. We found out that assisting networks of farmers and other stakeholders require different tools and skills than was usual in project management. Also monitoring and evaluation should be done differently.

In this presentation I would like to take you along several of these experiences, which illustrate a theoretical framework for working in partnerships. The good news is that effective networkers have always applied its principles, without which they would not have had results. What is needed however is recognition of their importance, and adaptations in the structure for management, funding and M&E for creating space to do what is necessary.

Key words: innovation, partnership, farm advisory.