

Reflections on the collaborative mechanisms of the ACIAR North West Vietnam Project

A comparison of project partners' perceptions at the start and the end of the Northwest Vietnam Project

This report¹ captures a summary of perceptions of project partners of the Northwest Vietnam Project about the collaborative mechanisms of the project, as provided in responses to evaluation questionnaires commissioned during Reflection and Planning workshops in 2010 and 2013. The questions were the following:

- 1a. What do you find positive or beneficial about working together with all the partner institutions?
- 2b. What do you find difficult or less positive about combining different disciplines and topics in one project?
- 3a. What do you find positive or beneficial when working with local authorities?
- 3b. What do you find difficult or less positive when working with local authorities?
- 4a. What do you find positive or beneficial about involving farmers in the research?
- 4b. What do you find difficult or less positive about involving farmers in the research?
5. Please name three things that you have learned in this project.
6. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the work and collaboration of the NW Vietnam project?

Each section below deals with one question and compares the respondents' perceptions at the start (2010) and the end (2013) of the project. Respondents are not identified personally, only by the institution or area they represent.

1a. What do you find positive or beneficial about working together with all the partner institutions?

In 2010, 23² respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of working with the different partner institutions had been **the opportunity to learn**, with eleven of these 23 respondents explicitly stating that they had learned from other project partners. As one of these eleven respondents put it: "... each partner institute has its own strength, thus, when

¹ The questionnaire was commissioned by the Project Leader, Elske van de Fliert, the data were processed by the Project Interpreter/Facilitator, Le Thi Hang Nga, and the comparative data analysis and report writing was done by a UQ research assistant, Hanneke Nooren.

² While numbers are used to indicate how many respondents provided a particular answer, be aware that these numbers represent multiple responses by some respondents. In some cases respondents have provided two or three answers to each question..

collaborating I can learn so much from others". [CASRAD]. While ten of these 23 respondents did not specify *what* they had learned from working with other project partners, others did. Five of the 23 respondents stated that they had **learned how to work with farmers**, while three respondents reported that they had **improved their understanding of different disciplines**. As one of the latter said: "My scientific knowledge of different fields is also enhanced by working with other partners" [PPRI]. Four of the 23 respondents stated they had **learned about sustainable techniques for cultivating sloping land**, while three others simply reported having learned more about "new" or "advanced" techniques and technologies.

Five respondents reported that working with different partner institutions **had enabled the researchers to draw on and/or combine different kinds of expertise**. Three of these five respondents stated that combining different kinds of expertise or "strengths" **had enabled the researchers to generate results that were more effective, or to resolve problems more comprehensively, or more quickly**. As one of them noted: "Each institution has its own strength so working together can bring more effective results". Another respondent said that working with a range of partner institutions enabled researchers "to solve problems more objectively and comprehensively".

Three respondents noted that working with different partner institutions had **enabled the researchers to solve multiple problems simultaneously**. As one of them stated: "We can solve multiple problems at the same time".

Three respondents reported that working with different partner institutions had **improved their ability to work with other people, or that it gave them experience in collaborating with colleagues from different partner institutions**. According to one of these respondents, it "enhances [our] team work capacity as well as the capacity to work with people we didn't know before".

In 2013, twelve respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of collaborating with the different partner institutions had been **the opportunity to exchange ideas, knowledge and experiences with colleagues from other institutions and/or learn from each other**. One of these respondents stated: "I like to exchange thoughts and experiences with other colleagues from other institutions", while another said: "To further share our experiences and knowledge." Three of these 12 respondents explicitly stated that they had **gained knowledge as a result of these exchanges**. As one of them put it: "Discussing with [colleagues from] other institutions helped me enrich my knowledge and equipped me with useful information. Five of these 12 respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of working with the different partners institutions was **learning from other project partners**. One of the latter reported: "I have learned so much specialised knowledge and field-based experiences from other project partners", while another said: "I have learned a lot of good experiences from other project partners ...".

Ten respondents reported that working with the different partner institutions had **enabled them to establish and/or strengthen relationships with staff members of other institutions, or establish or expand their collaboration networks**. While one of the respondents noted: "It is very beneficial to work with these institutions. I have made many good and knowledgeable friends ...", another said: "To establish a close linkage amongst partners and researchers". As one field researcher put it: "Collaborating with other research institutions ... has helped to establish a good supporting network which encouraged its members to share information and learn from each other." [NOMAFSI]

Ten respondents reported that working with the different partner institutions had **enabled them to develop or enhance their capabilities**. While one respondent simply said that it had “improved our research skills”, another respondent stated: “Enrich my in-field working skills and good working approach with farmers and local officers”. Four of these ten respondents stated that **it had improved their ability to work with other people**. One of these four respondents noted it had “improved my team work capacity”, another respondent stated it had “enriched] our experiences in working with others.”

Five respondents stated that one of the positive aspects of working with the different partner institutions was that they had **improved their understanding of disciplines other than their own**. As one of these respondents put it: “To improve our knowledge in ... field[s] which are not our expertise ...”. Another respondent had appreciated gaining “a good understanding of the nature of research from different perspectives”. Two of these five respondents stated that **knowing more about other disciplines enabled them to acquire a more holistic perspective**. For example, one team leader [appears to have³] stated that learning about different disciplines had enabled her “to have a holistic view when it comes to resolving problems that occur during [project] implementation” [PPRI].

1b. What do you find difficult or less positive about working together with all the partner institutions?

In 2010, five respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of working with the different partner institutions was that **it was difficult and time-consuming to coordinate and plan**. Two of these respondents observed that collaborating with a range of partner institutions involved a considerable amount of time spent on coordinating partners and/or activities. As one of them explained, “because of the [project’s] multi-stakeholder mechanism, it took a lot of time to coordinate across institutes”. [PPRI] Two other respondents noted that it was challenging to schedule activities in a way that enabled all relevant partners to participate. As one of them put it: “It’s difficult to arrange time to implement activities due to the schedules of the different partners”. [TBU]

Five respondents reported that working with the different partner institutions **required a lot of communication (such as discussions and information sharing), which was hampered when institutions were not located in close proximity of each other**. As three of these respondents pointed out, the physical distance between partner institutions negatively affected the researchers’ ability to communicate effectively. While one of the respondents stated that “each partner is based at a different location, causing difficulties in discussions” [TBU], another respondent provided more detail: “Researchers are far away from each other and their work is mainly in the field, while many things can’t be shared by emails or phone calls, which sometimes causes things not to go smoothly.”

Four respondents indicated that one of the challenges of working with the different partner institutions was that it **required a willingness, on the part of all the institutions involved, to work together towards the overall goal of the project**. Two of these four respondents reported that, at times, researchers put their own institutions’ work or interests ahead of those of other partner institutions. As one of them stated: “... sometimes, they care more

³ Her response was translated as: “To gain more transdisciplinary knowledge then to have a holistic view ...”. I have interpreted this to mean: “To gain more knowledge about different scientific disciplines enabled me ...”.

about their institute's benefit and forget to share the results, affecting the overall project's outcomes". [TBU]

Four respondents reported, or implied, that one of the challenges of working with all the different partner institutions was that **it was difficult to reach agreement**. According to one of these respondents, "it is challenging for all the partners to reach agreement in all activities". [NOMAFSI]

Three respondents reported that one of the challenges of working with the different partner institutions was that **it was time-consuming**. As one of these respondents put it, "it's more time-consuming than normal". [PPRI]

In 2013, ten respondents reported that one of the difficulties of working with the different partner institutions was that **differences in types of expertise, levels of knowledge, and perspective made it challenging to work together**. While two of these respondents only stated that individuals with "limited knowledge in other fields cause challenges" for collaboration, three others observed that due to different kinds of expertise, i.e. fields of study or disciplines, it had been difficult to conduct "in-depth discussions". Another respondent pointed out that **overcoming these differences in expertise and knowledge took time and effort**: "It was necessary to spend time discussing, explaining more for our partners to reach a mutual understanding" [PPRI]. Four of these ten respondents mentioned that **a multitude of perspectives towards issues meant that reaching mutual agreement was difficult and time-consuming**. As one respondent put it: "It was very time-consuming to reach one agreement upon one specific problem because everyone looked at it from a different perspective." [HUA].

Nine respondents reported that one of the challenges of working with a range of partner institutions had been that it was **difficult to coordinate and plan meetings and other project activities**. According to four respondents, it had been difficult to schedule meetings for the multi-disciplinary teams as well as the implementation of project activities. As one of them stated: "[It was] challenging to arrange a suitable time for all the partners to implement activities together". Two other respondents indicated that the problems associated with scheduling meetings were due to, at least in part, the different work schedules used by the different institutions.

Six respondents reported that one of the challenges of working with the different partner institutions had been **difficulties associated with the sharing of information between institutions**. While two respondents did not specify what had been problematic, others indicated that some research institutions had shared little information or were "not open in sharing information". Another respondent reported that it had been "difficult to find the right method for sharing information".

Five respondents noted that one of the challenges of working with the different partner institutions had been **that it required willingness, on the part of all the institutions involved, to work together**. Three of these respondents noted that there had been reluctance, on the part of several of the institutions involved, to work with other partner institutions. As one of the respondents put it: "The collaboration for project implementation was not effective enough because each partner only focused on his institute's responsibility rather than on the overall objectives of the project".

Five respondents reported that one of the challenges of working with the different partner institutions were **the differences in the ways in which these institutions operated**. One of

these respondents stated: “Difficulties caused by the differences in institutional mechanism”. Another respondent observed: “Different research institutes [have] their own mechanism for human resources and budgeting [which] will cause difficulties in conducting activities”.

2a. What do you find positive or beneficial about combining different disciplines and topics in one project?

In 2010, eight respondents reported that one of the benefits of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **it can help researchers to generate better, or more comprehensive, solutions to problems, or create more “holistic impacts”**. While one of these respondents stated that “combining different disciplines and topics in one project can help solve problems more comprehensively”, another respondent said that it “ensures holistic impacts on beneficiaries”. [NOMAFSI]

Six respondents reported that one of the benefits of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that it **had enabled them to gain knowledge and/or experience, or learn new ways to conduct research**. While one of these respondents stated that “researchers gain much experience and knowledge for their work”, another reported: “Project staff can learn new methodologies and approaches”. [NOMAFSI]

Six respondents reported that one of the benefits of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that it **enabled the partner institutions to complement each other, allowing researchers to draw on different types of knowledge and expertise** in order to achieve the project’s objectives. As one of the respondents stated: “Multi-stakeholder partners can support and complement each other, [which can] bring such holistic success”. Another respondent wrote: “In principle, the project can make use of many disciplines to serve its objectives”.

Five respondents reported that combining different disciplines and topics in one project **enables researchers to understand each problem or target audience from a range of perspectives**. As one of the respondents explained, it enables a “comprehensive understanding of the target audience”. Two of these respondents explicitly **linked a comprehensive understanding of a particular problem with being able to generate better solutions**. As one of the latter put it: “We can see problems from many perspectives so we can find the best solutions”.

Four respondents reported that one of the benefits of combining different disciplines and topics in one project had been **the opportunity to exchange knowledge and experience with colleagues from different partner institutions, and to learn from each other**. One of the respondents stated that it had “enabled us to collaborate with colleagues from different research institutes [and] increase our knowledge”. [TBU]

Three respondents reported that one of the benefits of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **it enables researchers to resolve numerous problems concurrently**. As one of these respondents stated: “We can solve multiple problems at the same time”. [Lai Chau]

In 2013, seven respondents mentioned that one of the positive aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that it **enabled researchers to generate**

better solutions to problems, i.e. solutions that were more appropriate, feasible, and/or more effective, or sustainable. One of the respondents stated that “results deduced from the strong collaboration crossing different sectors will be more feasible and applicable”. Another respondent noted: “When we combine different disciplines and topics, we could help farmers more in developing their farming systems” [HUA].

Five respondents reported that combining different disciplines and topics in one project **enabled the researchers to use a holistic, or more holistic, approach to understanding and/or solving problems.** As one of these respondents put it: “Better understanding of various topics and disciplines provided researchers with a more holistic view of everything”, while another respondent stated: “Every issue that emerged was solved using a holistic approach provided by the researchers” [PPRI].

Five respondents reported that combining different disciplines and topics in one project had **enabled them to broaden their knowledge regarding other disciplines.** As one of these respondents put it, it had given him/her a chance to “learn more about other fields which I used to have very limited knowledge about”.

Five respondents reported that combining different disciplines and topics in one project had **enabled them to develop and/or improve particular skills,** including analytical skills, communication skills, and group facilitation skills. One of these respondents stated: “I have learnt how to utilise and share related information to help myself and others accomplish our tasks.”

Four respondents mentioned that combining different disciplines and topics in one project had **enabled the various partner institutions to “complement each other” in terms of expertise, approach, and methodology.** As one respondent stated: “Each institute will complement each other in terms of research methodology and approach”.

Three respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project had been **the opportunity to exchange information with colleagues from different partner institutions.** As one respondent put it: “Combining different disciplines and topics engaged partners to share their experience, data and results with other partners in the project. This rarely happens in a single disciplinary project”.

2b. What do you find difficult or less positive about combining different disciplines and topics in one project?

In 2010, five respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project is that **it requires in-depth knowledge of all the relevant disciplines.** Three of these five respondents noted that **lack of such knowledge can make it challenging to understand project activities or outcomes**, while two other respondents noted that **lack of such knowledge can cause problems when collaborating with other project partners.** One of the former noted that it was “difficult to understand all the project activities as it requires a large and deep knowledge”. One of the latter stated: “Researchers sometimes don’t have large knowledge about different fields, so it can bring challenges when conducting group work with other partners”. [TBU]

Five respondents reported that one negative aspect of combining different disciplines and topics in one project is that **researchers from different institutions, or who work in different disciplines, tend to have different perceptions and ideas regarding problems, approaches and/or outcomes.** Two of these respondents reported that **differences in**

perception can cause problems during project implementation and/or evaluation, while another respondent said that **differences in perception can make it hard to reach agreement**. As the latter explained: “Different disciplines have different ways of seeing problems, thus sometimes it’s difficult to reach an agreement” (see also next paragraph).

Five other respondents reported that one negative aspect of combining different disciplines and topics in one project is that **it can make it difficult to reach agreement, or can generate disagreement or even conflict between researchers**. One of these respondents stated that “it can cause disagreement in research or guidance of project activities”, while another respondent noted that “conflicts can happen during the implementation”. [PPRI].

Four respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **it had made it difficult to coordinate and/or manage project activities**. Three of these respondents indicated that this type of project can be difficult to coordinate, one of which pointed to the need to engage a competent coordinator: “... to make the project more successful, we need to have a good coordinator who can synthesize, plan activities, report and share data to all partners”. [NOMAFSI]

Two respondents reported that one of the challenges of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **it required adequate sharing of information**. As one of these respondents stated: “Each partner is in charge of one activity; thus, without proper information-sharing mechanism, we could not integrate with each other to improve our performance”. [RUDEC] Another respondent noted: “Each institution worked on their own topic while information sharing is limited and that leads to less effective results.”

In 2013, eight respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **differences in types of expertise and levels of knowledge had caused difficulties**. While one respondent simply stated that “researchers faced difficulties when dealing with other specialised topics”, other respondents were more specific. Two of these eight respondents mentioned that **differences in expertise made it hard to conduct in-depth discussions of topics or tasks**, with one of them reporting: “When we wanted to have an in-depth discussion about one topic, it was hard to progress because everyone had different expertise”. Three of these eight respondents reported that **differences in level of knowledge had caused misunderstanding and/or arguments**. As one of them mentioned: “Lack of knowledge in different topics can bring up arguments”.

Considering the respondents’ reports in the paragraph above, it is not surprising that four other respondents noted, or implied, that one of the negative aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **it made it difficult to reach agreement**. Two of these respondents touched on the need for competent facilitation of the communication process. As one of them put it: “If the facilitator doesn’t use the right approach and methodologies, it would be hard for the team members to reach an agreement”.

Five respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **it was time-consuming, in terms of making decisions, integrating the different disciplines, or getting acquainted with colleagues from other institutions**. Two of these respondents simply noted that it was (too) time-consuming. One respondent indicated that it had been time-consuming to make collective decisions, while another mentioned that it had taken a lot of time to integrate all the disciplines. One of the respondents explained that it took a considerable amount of time to feel at ease with other project partners: “It was time-consuming to get to know other

officers and their institutes and to become open-minded with each other give [a] holistic decision”.

Five respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of combining different disciplines and topics in one project was that **it had made it difficult to coordinate and/or plan project activities**. As one of the respondents stated: “Due to the multi-disciplinary approach, lack of proper management and coordination of activities has impacted on the whole team.” Another respondent reported: “It was hard to arrange a good time frame for the different partners. This can affect the overall progress of the project.”

Two respondents noted that one of the challenges of combining different disciplines and topics in one project had been **that it required sharing of information between partner institutions**. One of these respondents noted that it required information to be shared in a timely manner, while the other noted: “It is challenging ... to share information with other institutes”.

3a. What do you find positive or beneficial when working with local authorities? ⁴

In 2010, seventeen respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of working with local authorities was that **these local authorities were knowledgeable about their localities and provided the researchers with useful insights and information on the local situation**. One of these respondents noted: “Local staff have a deep understanding of the local culture, socio-economic [situation], etc.. They can bring so much knowledge to the project”. [TBU] Another respondent pointed to some of the advantages of having access to such knowledge: “When we are going to the fields, we can understand the situation better, this can help save time and money. Plus, we can conduct the field activities better”. [PPRI]

Fifteen respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of working with local authorities was that **the support and involvement of the local authorities made it easier to implement project activities**. As one of these respondents put it: “Good relationships with the local authorities helps the project staff work more conveniently in the sites”. Another of these respondents said: “Local staff can assist in conducting PM&E at the local level”. [PPRI] Three respondents noted that **without local authority support it would have been more difficult to obtain permission for the foreign experts to work in the project sites**. As one of these respondents stated: “Support from local authorities ... helps to get entry permission for foreign experts”.

Eight respondents reported that one positive aspect of working with local authorities was that **they made it easier for the researchers to communicate and/or work with the local farmers, and thus contributed to the achievement of the project objectives**. Four of these respondents indicated that local farmers tended to respect and listen to the local authorities, which facilitated the acceptance of project activities and their implementation. According to one of these respondents, “local officers understand their locations, so their voice is important to the farmers, which helps to implement experiments smoothly”.

⁴ The responses of the different respondents indicate that there were differences in their interpretation of the term “local authorities”. While some respondents clearly interpreted it as “local leaders” (e.g. commune leaders), others took it to mean any government official who worked at the local level (e.g. agricultural extension officers). In most cases it is not clear how the respondent has interpreted the term, and therefore this summary does not distinguish between the two.

Another respondent said that “local staff ... they are the most suitable extension communicators”. [NOMAFSI]

Four respondents reported that one positive aspect of working with local authorities was that **it made it easier and/or quicker to replicate or scale up project results**. One of these respondents stated that “good outcomes are replicated easily”. Another respondent said that “with the local government’s interest and participation, more enabling policies will be passed to encourage farmers to replicate outcomes into a larger production scale”. [NOMAFSI]

Three respondents reported that one positive aspect of working with local authorities was that **it made it easier to communicate of the results of experiments or outcomes of the project**. One of these respondents noted: “Local authorities can be very effective communicators of successful project outcomes”. [NOMAFSI]

In 2013, no less than 22 respondents reported one of the benefits of working with local authorities was that **the support and involvement of the local authorities had made it easier to implement the project**. Many of these respondents described different ways in which their collaboration with local authorities had facilitated the project’s implementation (see next two paragraphs).

Ten of these 22 respondents reported that the involvement of the local authorities and/or the support these authorities had provided **had made it easier to implement project activities**. As one respondent said: “Thanks to the collaboration with the local government, it was easier for us to conduct activities in the field, [it] helped us to achieve our goals earlier than anticipated”. Another respondent said that support from the local authorities had made it “much easier to solve some problems that emerged during the implementation of on-farm activities” [NOMAFSI]. Yet another respondents stated that working with the local authorities had helped “to speed up the administrative procedures”.

Eight of these 22 respondents reported that the involvement of the local authorities **had made it easier to communicate and/or work with the local farmers**. Four of these eight respondents stated that involving local authorities **made it easier to convince the local farmers to become involved**, which two respondents attributed to the degree of trust between local authorities and farmers. As one of them put it: “It helps to gain the farmers’ trust and enthusiasm when conducting activities in the field”. Two others said that involving local authorities had **helped to overcome the language barrier between ethnic minority farmers and themselves**. As one of the latter explained: “The north-western areas are characterised by unique customs and minority languages, thus it would be hard for us to approach [the farmers] without the involvement of the local government.” Two others reported that collaboration with local authorities **made it easier to transfer information and technologies to local farmers**. As one of them stated: “Local governments ... their voice weighs more to their farmers, hence, they played the most important role in transferring information and technologies”.

Seven respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of working with local authorities was that **these authorities had provided them with a better understanding of the local situation**. According to one respondent, working with local authorities had provided him/her with “... a clearer understanding of the complex context” [NOMAFSI], while another said it had enabled him/her “to exploit their knowledge ...” [NOMAFSI]. Three of these seven respondents commented that having a better understanding of the

local development strategies made it possible to adjust the project objectives or activities to ensure a better fit with these strategies. As one of them put it: “To capture the development strategy [which allows us] to adjust the project objectives to be more aligned with the [conditions in the] area”.

3b. What do you find difficult or less positive when working with local authorities? ⁵

In 2010, seven respondents reported that one of the difficulties of working with local authorities was **the authorities’ limited capacity and knowledge, and/or lack of initiative**. As one of these respondents explained: “Some activities are too technical for them to understand, such as soil sample collection, soil analysis, commodity, value chain, markets, etc., so they don’t find them interesting”. One of the respondents noted that their local partners tended to lack initiative: “They are normally very passive and don’t take any initiative in the work”. [NOMAFSI]

Six respondents reported that one of the difficult aspects of working with local authorities was that **the local authorities were too busy to be fully involved in the project activities**. As one of these respondents explained: “They are government officers so are committed to other tasks, [so] it’s hard for them to arrange time for the implementation [of project activities]”. [Lai Chau] Another respondent confirmed this: “Local staff are assigned workloads that are too large and they can’t commit 100 per cent to the project activities”. [NOMAFSI].

Three respondents reported that it had been challenging to involve local authorities in project activities because **the local authorities did not know enough about the project and/or did not understand how, nor why, they should collaborate with other project partners**. As one of these respondents put it: “A lot of the time, local staff don’t really understand the purpose of our project, so they are not committed”. [TBU] Two other respondents indicated there may have been more to it. One of them noted that there had been an “unclear collaboration mechanism for local partners”, which appeared to be corroborated by the other respondent: “... our project didn’t collaborate strong enough with the local partners. To improve this, we need to have a clear mechanism in which their roles, responsibilities and benefits need to be clearly stated”. [RUDEC]

Three respondents reported that one of the difficulties associated with working with local authorities was that **it involved putting up with rigid, complicated and time-consuming administrative procedures**. As one of these respondents observed: “The local systems are very inflexible and we have to be very patient to go through all the lengthy procedures when collaborating with them”. [TBU]

In 2013, eight respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of working with local authorities was that **it had been difficult to involve local authorities in the project activities, due to lack of interest and/or insufficient allowances**. Three of these eight respondents stated that some of the local authorities were simply not interested in being involved in the project. Two of these eight respondents reported that local authorities had been dissuaded from participating due to the inadequate, or nonexistent, allowances the project provided to local staff. As one of them stated: “Low or no allowances for local

⁵ See Note 3 above.

officers (commune and district levels) discourages them from involvement in the project activities”.

Five respondents reported that one of the challenges of working with local authorities had been **the local authorities’ limited capacity and knowledge, or lack of initiative**. While one of these respondents stated that “local officers have limited knowledge”, two others noted that, at least in some localities, the capacity of the local authorities was “limited”. As one of them put it: “Local partners have limited capacity to conduct research activities”. Two of these five respondents reported that their local partners failed to take initiative, with one of them stating: “Local partners didn’t take initiative in conducting field activities ...” [PPRI]

Four respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of working with local authorities had been **the high turnover of local staff**. According to one of these respondents: “Local partners changing staff can cause a lot of difficulties” [NOMAFSI].

Three respondents reported that one of the difficult aspects of working with local authorities was that **the local authorities were too busy to get involved in the project activities, due to their heavy workloads**. As one of them put it: “Local partners are always overloaded with work, so they have to prioritise their daily tasks ... it is difficult to engage them in all the project activities”.

Three respondents reported that one of the challenges of working with local authorities had been **the way in which the local authorities interacted with local farmers**. As one of them stated: “They are still using a top-down approach when working with farmers”.

4a. What do you find positive or beneficial about involving farmers in the research?

In 2010, 11 respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it gave the researchers an opportunity to learn from the farmers’ knowledge and/or experience**. While ten of the 11 respondents stated that farmers had useful knowledge, they referred to knowledge about different topics, including soils, climate, crops and farming techniques. According to one of them: “The farmers, who understand the disadvantages of the localities, can advise project officers in many things”. [CASRAD] Five of these 11 respondents stated that farmers possessed useful experience, with four referring to experience in farming. One of the latter stated: “We should take into consideration all the farmers’ farming experience and knowledge”. [TBU]

Nine respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research **was that it facilitated the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of field experiments**. Six of these nine respondents said that the farmers’ involvement facilitated the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of experiments, with one of the latter noting that it made “implementing experiments easier and more convenient”. Another respondent said that “the farmers are the ones who participate directly in farming activities, so they are the most suitable to monitor and evaluate the project results”.

Seven respondents reported that involving farmers in the research **enabled the researchers to develop experiments and/or interventions that are appropriate to the farmers’ needs**. Three of these seven respondents stated that **feedback provided by the farmers had helped them to adjust their experiments**. As one of them put it: “Farmers can provide us with good feedback about pros and cons of the experiments, we then can adjust [it] accordingly if suitable”. [TBU]

Seven respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it increased the project's sustainability because the farmers are more likely to continue using the techniques developed by the project**. As one of the respondents stated: "As farmers are implementing the experiments in the fields, they can replicate [the techniques] better when the project exits". [Lai Chau]

Four respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it strengthened the farmers' capacity, skills and/or self-confidence**. According to one of these respondents, it "enhances the farmers' role, their awareness and their decision-making capacity in solving their problems". Another respondent explained: "If farmers understand the project and become more engaged, their skills will be increased in many aspects". [NOMAFSI]

Three respondents said that one positive aspect of involving local farmers in the research was that **farmers facilitated the dissemination of project results to other farmers**. One of these respondents said: "Once witnessing the successful outcomes, they will be the most effective communicators" [NOMAFSI], while another explained that: "the communication of the project results will be more effective when farmers talk to farmers".

Three respondents stated that involving the farmers in the research **had enabled the researchers to identify the farmers' real needs**. As one of these respondents stated: "To capture farmers' real needs". [PPRI]

In 2013, eleven respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it facilitated the dissemination of project results, i.e. new farming techniques, either to farmers who had been involved in the research activities, or to farmers who had not been involved**. Five of these 11 respondents said that the farmers' involvement in the project activities meant that **it was easier and/or quicker to introduce new techniques to these farmers**. As one of the respondents put it: "When farmers are directly involved in implementing the project, they know how to apply new techniques very quickly." In addition, five of these 11 respondents reported that involving farmers in the research **improved the "scaling-up process", i.e. the dissemination of new techniques to other farmers**. While one of these respondents said that "working with farmers speeds up the scaling up process", another said that involving farmers in the research "improves the dissemination and up-scaling process because farmers learn best from other farmers. [...]".

Seven respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it enabled the researchers to tailor their research activities to the local needs and circumstances or ensure that research results are suitable to the local context**. Four of these seven respondents indicated that the farmers' involvement enabled researchers to customise the research activities. While one of these respondents said that farmers can advise "the researchers to make techniques more suitable to their farming customs and habits", another said that the farmers "helped the project researchers conduct trials that are close to their conditions". Three of these seven respondents reported that the farmers' involvement ensured research outcomes were more suitable to the local context. As one of the put it: "Research outcomes will be more applicable in the farmers' context" [NOMAFSI].

Five respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it had enabled the researchers to identify or understand the farmers' real needs**. As one of them put it: "We can capture the farmers' difficulties and needs when

involving them in the project”. Another respondent said that understanding the farmers’ needs enabled the researchers to help the farmers improve their livelihoods and farming practices: “We can get to know farmers’ real needs to help them to improve their incomes and knowledge as well as [adopt] good farming practices”.

Five respondents reported that one of the positive aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it gave the researchers an opportunity to learn from the farmers’ knowledge and experience**. Three of these respondents mentioned that they had learned from the farmers’ farming experience. As one of them put it: “To learn from the farmers’ rich knowledge and experience about production”. Another stated: “Researchers can learn a lot of useful experience from farmers”.

4b. What do you find difficult or less positive about involving farmers in the research?

In 2010, nine respondents reported that one of the challenges of involving farmers in the research was that **the farmers tended to be conservative and/or reluctant to change their traditional farming techniques and/or adopt new farming techniques**. One of the respondents reported: “The majority of farmers are resistant to changing to advanced techniques. They tend to be suspicious and don’t want to give up their traditional farming customs”. [NOMAFSI] Another respondent explained: “They are resistant to changing their traditional customs and habits, especially they don’t want to invest more labour inputs even after witnessing the economic benefits of doing it”. [TBU]

Six ⁶ respondents reported that one of the challenges of involving farmers in the research had been **the farmers’ lack of enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the project, and/or a lack of ownership over the project’s experiments**. While two respondents noted a general lack of enthusiasm about the project, three others observed a lack of ownership over the experiments on the part of the farmers. As one of the latter put it: “Many farmers think the experiment areas belong to the project and they don’t pay attention to them”.

Four respondents reported that one of the challenges of involving farmers in the research is that **it was time-consuming, especially when working with ethnic minority farmers**. Each of these respondents described what they had found to be time-consuming, which included: winning farmers over, listening, explaining, capacity building, conducting experiments, and providing guidance. As one respondent stated: “In some remote areas, we have to spend a lot of time working with the farmers and trying to convince them ...”. [PPRI]. Another respondent explained: “It will be very time-consuming, especially when working with ethnic minority farmers. To increase the effectiveness, it would take so much time to explain them the purposes, give them proper guidance, and implement activities together with them in the field”. [NOMAFSI]

Four respondents reported that one of the challenges associated with involving farmer in the research was **the language barrier between the researchers and the farmers**. As one of these respondents stated: “The language barrier when working with [ethnic] minority farmers”. [NOMAFSI]

⁶ This total does not include two respondents who noted that the farmers were “expectant”. One of these responses reads: “Maybe farmers are still not aware of their important role in the project, so they are still expectant [and do] not actively participate in activities”. As the rest of the sentence suggests the farmers adopted a “wait-and-see approach” rather than showing an excited feeling that something was about to happen, this suggests a translation error.

Three respondents reported that one of the difficulties associated with involving farmers in the research was that **some of the farmers were either too afraid or too shy to share their thoughts**. Two respondents noted that sometimes, or in some areas, the farmers had been too frightened, with one respondent reporting that: “Sometimes, they are too afraid to share their thoughts”. [TBU] Another respondent noted that farmers in some remote areas “are intimidated and don’t dare to speak their minds”. [PPRI] Another respondent said that the farmers’ “shyness in sharing thoughts” was a great limitation. [NOMAFSI],

Three respondents reported that one challenge of involving farmers in the research had been that **the farmers’ tendency to focus on getting financial support from the project**. One of these respondents stated that “some farmers are very subsidy-oriented”, while another said: “... they are waiting for financial support only ...”. Another respondent observed that there was a direct link between the availability of financial support and the farmers’ willingness to participate in project activities. As he/she put it: “They are demanding financial support and if we can’t [give it], their participation will be decreased”. [TBU]

Three respondents reported that one challenge of involving farmers in the research was that **the farmers’ were not sufficiently aware of their role in the project and/or of the project’s long-term benefits**. As one of these respondents put it: “Farmers still don’t imagine exactly what they are doing with the project and what benefits they can get from the activities”. Another respondent stated: “Farmers’ low awareness prevents them from seeing the long-term benefit of the project”. [Lai Chau]

In 2013, eight respondents reported that it had been challenging to involve farmers in the research because **the farmers were conservative and/or reluctant to change their traditional farming practices and/or reluctant to try innovations**. One of these respondents stated: “Some farmers are very conservative. This causes a barrier for the technology [transfer] process ...”. Another respondent noted: “Some farmers are still stubborn, they don’t like to try innovations. This can cause so many difficulties for the researchers”.

Six respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it was time-consuming and/or required a lot of patience**. As one of the respondents put it: “The farmers have limited knowledge and it is time-consuming to explain [things] to them”. Another respondent explained: “It requires the project researchers to be extremely patient with minority farmers”.

Six respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of involving farmers in the research had been **the farmers’ tendency to focus on obtaining financial support and/or subsidised inputs from the project**. One of these respondents observed: “The farmers are only interested in getting inputs subsidised by the project”. Another respondent seemed to corroborate this: “How willing farmers are depends on how much financial support they receive from the project.” [NOMAFSI].

Four respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of involving farmers in the research had been **the language barrier between the researchers and the farmers**. One of the respondents stated: “Some minority farmers don’t know how to speak Vietnamese, so it is hard for us to communicate with them”. Another respondent stated: “Language barriers between researchers and ethnic [minority] farmers, especially women”. [PPRI]

Three respondents reported that one of the negative aspects of involving farmers in the research was that **it had the potential to compromise the validity of the research results**. As one of the respondents explained: “Errors can happen while involving farmers in the research process. This can lead to a lower level of validity”.

5. Please name three things that you have learned in this project.

In 2010, eleven respondents reported that they had **learned how to work with farmers, or how to work better or more effectively with farmers**. One of these respondents stated: “How to work with farmers (minority [farmers] in particular)”. [NOMAFSI], while another respondent said that he/she had learned “to be more patient and [to] be all ears for the farmers”. [PPRI]

Eight respondents reported that they had **learned about, or how to use, monitoring and/or evaluation methods**. Three of these eight respondents explicitly stated that they had **learned about, or how to use, participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E)** (see below). While one of these respondents reported that he/she had “learn[ed] how to evaluate activities effectively”, another respondent stated: “I know how to evaluate the effectiveness of one project or program” [Lai Chau] Another respondent explained: “I have improved my knowledge and expertise, especially in PM&E methodology”. [PPRI]

Eight respondents reported, or implied, that they **had learned about research or research approaches, or learned (more) about how to conduct research**. Of the six respondents who indicated that they had learned about research or research approaches, only two respondents stated that they had **learned about the “transdisciplinary approach”**. Two of these eight respondents indicated that they had learned a range of research skills, one of whom stated that he/she had learned how to conduct “experiments on a large scale”. The other listed: “Diagnostic study, field-based research, data analysis and reporting”. [NOMAFSI]

Six respondents indicated that they had **learned about participatory methods, three of whom reported that they had learned about, or how to, conduct a participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E)**⁷. One of these respondents reported to have learned that “participatory methods help to identify needs and opportunities in agricultural development in the North West ...”. Another respondent learned to get better understanding of “the disadvantages and advantages of the localities by using the transect walk”. [CASRAD]

Six respondents reported that they had **learned about farming techniques**, including sustainable techniques to cultivate sloping land, intercropping and rotating systems, and soil conservation. One of these respondents stated: “I have learned so much agricultural experience and knowledge which will help make my lectures more vivid and meaningful for my students”. [TBU]

Three respondents reported that they had **learned about the working styles of other partners**. One of these respondents stated: “I have also learned about the working style of the Vietnamese partners and Australian experts”. [TBU] Another respondent reported: “I have learned more about the foreign experts’ working style”. [PPRI]

⁷ These three respondents are also included in the section on respondents who reported to have learned about, or how to conduct, monitoring and/or evaluation (see above).

Two respondents reported that they had **learned about teamwork or how to work in a more collaborative way**.

In 2013, seventeen respondents reported, or implied, that they **had learned about research or a particular research approach, or gained research skills**. Eight of these seventeen respondents stated explicitly that they had **learned about the “transdisciplinary approach”**, without elaborating. Seven of these seventeen respondents reported to have gained research skills. One of these respondents stated he/she had gained “individual working skills in conducting trials”.

Ten respondents indicated that they had **learned about the participatory approach or participatory methods, four of whom reported that they had learned about, or how to conduct, participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E)**. One of the six respondents who reported having learned about the participatory approach or participatory methods, stated: “Participatory method[s] to encourage farmers to take part in the research activities”.

Ten respondents reported that they had **learned about teamwork or working collaboratively**. Five of these nine respondents stated to have learned about teamwork. One of the five respondents who reported to have learned about collaboration stated: “Cross-collaboration with other experts, scientists, and universities” [TBU], while another said: “Strong collaboration includes regular sharing of information and experience”. [NOMAFSI]

Four respondents indicated that they had **learned about information sharing and/or the importance of sharing information**. As one of these respondents put it: “It is very useful to exchange information and results”.

Four respondents reported to have **gained knowledge**. While one of these respondents stated: “I have enriched my professional knowledge”, another said: “I have learned basic knowledge in different fields, such as soil science, crop systems, and plant protection”.

Three respondents indicated that they had learned about **information sharing or the importance of information sharing**, with one of them saying: “It is very useful to exchange information and results”.

Only one respondent stated that he/she had **learned “how to work with farmers”**.

6. Do you have any suggestions on how to improve the work and collaboration of the NW Vietnam project?

In 2010, fourteen respondents suggested that there should be **more information sharing between project partners, either to ensure everyone is aware of the activities and plans of other partners, or to ensure that there is sufficient exchange of data, reports and other outputs**. Seven of these 14 respondents called for regular information sharing or updates, or for more meetings or discussions. As one of these respondents put it: “There need to be more meetings so that all the partners know and understand the other [partners'] activities as well as their plans”. Four of these 14 respondents called for more sharing of data and other outputs. As one of the latter stated: “Better data and report exchange amongst partners”. [PPRI]

Eight respondents pointed to the need for **better coordination and/or planning of project activities**. Four of these respondents indicated that there was a need to **improve the performance of the project coordinator**, in particular in terms of better, and more timely, sharing of information. As one of these respondents put it: “The project coordinator needs to work more closely and effectively with all partners”. Another respondent said: “The project needs to have a qualified Vietnamese project coordinator who is good at sharing information, processing reports from the components, facilitating, planning and connecting activities”. Four other respondents referred to **the need for better planning**, from clarifying the roles and responsibilities of all the project partners, to the timely development and sharing of implementation plans, to holding regular planning meetings. As one of these four respondents stated: “Implementation plans should be designed well in advance and shared amongst partners so we can all take initiative and ensure the progress”. [TBU]

Five respondents indicated that **there should be more capacity building**. While three of these respondents pointed to the need to improve the capacity of local partners or local officers, one respondent stated that the researchers’ capacity should be enhanced. One respondent simply called for “more capacity building workshops”. [NOMAFSI]

Three respondents pointed to the need to **review the allocation of budget and salaries to ensure the distribution is fair and/or in line with allocated tasks and responsibilities**. As one of these respondents put it: “Reconsider the budget breakdown amongst stakeholders annually to ensure the equitability”. [TBU]

In 2013, eight respondents pointed to the need for **better coordination or planning of project activities**. Two of these eight respondents stated that it was necessary have full-time coordinator(s). As one of them put it: “to have full-time, committed researchers to thoroughly coordinate all the activities in the project”. Two of the eight respondents called for the development of work plans for each of the partner institutions. As one of the latter stated: “Detailed work plan for each partner”. [NOMAFSI]

Seven respondents reported that there should be **more sharing of information and/or exchange of ideas between project partners**. While one of them said that: “Data and research results need to be shared across institutes”, another stated that an “effective sharing mechanism should be established”. A third respondent suggested: “Each partner needs to nominate one full-time staff who needs to attend all meetings and pass the information on to other colleagues”.

Five respondents reported that the work and collaboration of the project could be improved by **avoiding staff turnover** as much as possible, or as one put it “have long-term staff”, with one respondent stating that “if staff changing is unavoidable” new staff members should be given a “good induction”.

Four respondents called for more **capacity building for project staff**, which some said was necessary for staff to enhance their research skills. As one of these respondents put it: “There should be more trainings, capacity building workshops to enhance the researchers’ skills”.

Three respondents pointed to the need to **improve the performance of the leaders**; i.e. those heading the Vietnamese institutes involved in the project as well as the project and group leaders. While one of these respondents said that “the institutes’ leaders need to manage their staff better”, another stated that “the leaders from the Vietnamese institutes [have] to participate in all the meetings and discussions”.