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Collaborative agreements: A 'how to' guide

Victoria Henson-Apollonio

Partnerships can be an extremely effective way to harness additional skills and resources and minimize costs. Collaboration allows scientists (and other partners) to access a broad range of expertise and fosters a multi-disciplinary approach, both of which are often required when tackling complex research issues. However, it may be difficult to make the most of collaborative agreements, since different partners may have different objectives and approaches and misunderstandings can occur. Creating successful partnerships involves:

- developing a vision that can be used to shape a shared understanding of the project's goals;
- defining individual activities and objectives;
- defining a joint approach that brings the benefits of collaboration to each organization;
- developing a joint work plan;
- identifying methods for dealing jointly with any disagreements or conflicts; and
- drafting a written agreement that reflects the outcomes of this process.

Introduction

Collaboration between international and national scientists occurs on specific research projects usually because of a shared objective (e.g. increasing crop yields through introducing new varieties or improving methods of pest control). Despite common objectives, relationships between research partners can become strained when steps are taken to formalize the collaboration. Concerns may arise about who remains in charge of the initiative and which institutional research interest should take precedence.

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) Central Advisory Service on Intellectual Property (CAS-IP) has helped review a number of agreements related to formalizing such partnerships. This document presents some practical advice for organizations wishing to obtain long-term benefits from their collaborative work and for project leaders attempting to keep the agreement-drafting process on track.

The benefits of collaboration

Science has always fostered competition and collaboration. Today, researchers are increasingly seeking partnerships as a means of filling resource gaps and strengthening research outcomes and impacts. Achieving tangible, long-term benefits for as many beneficiaries as possible requires a multi-disciplinary approach, particularly when tackling research in agriculture and other applied sciences. Collaboration and networking offer the best way forward since they allow researchers to obtain additional data, access specialized equipment and create feedback loops that will speed improvements in research methods. Institutionally, collaboration helps stretch and complement valuable resources and secure access to expertise that will improve a project's outcome and impact.

Preliminary exchanges between prospective partners often highlight opportunities for collaboration. Although these relationships start off in a positive manner, misunderstandings and conflicts may soon arise if objectives and responsibilities

are not clearly established and documented during the process of drafting the collaborative agreement. The following steps should be followed to help partners stay on track throughout this process.

Develop the vision

Each partner should write, independently, a 'rough draft' of the project document outlining the expected project goals and what success means for them. The goal may vary from a simple one, such as establishing a network to share data sets, to a very complex one involving a global challenge, such as curbing global warming.

Define activities and resources

Each partner should define their own objectives and activities and highlight any gaps in their resources and the assets they will contribute to the collaboration. A complete list of necessary resources should also be drafted, along with the tangible and intangible resources already available at each institution. Overlap of activities may become a problem if partners do not initially spell out the activities they wish to initiate, partner in, and assume responsibility for. It is a good idea for collaborators to keep each other well-informed about expectations, resources and changes in the competencies that are available to the project.

Develop a joint approach

Once the independent visions have been drafted and made clear to each partner, a shared vision or approach can be developed. This should identify what each institution gains from the collaboration. Each institution's legal or technology transfer office should be included in the discussion; this will build an institutional memory of the potential partnership and develop an early understanding between the individuals drafting the agreement.

Develop a joint work plan

This should be as detailed as possible. It will foster a clear understanding of tasks and responsibilities, the 'know-how' that

ILAC Brief 4

each partner possesses and the intended individual and collaborative outputs. Close attention to detail at this stage also increases ability to communicate the project to donors or other organizations that might be unfamiliar with the research work. An intellectual property management plan should be established, involving all partners and promoting mutual understanding of ownership. This step often sets the tone of future communications. Clarity, honesty and realistic expectations are important.

Conflict resolution

The partners should acknowledge that disagreements and misunderstandings will probably occur. It is a good idea to identify a staff member at each partner institution who has facilitation or conflict resolution skills, or who can develop such skills. Alternatively, look at the possibility of using mediation and arbitration to deal with institutional disagreements. Identifying such options early on will help overcome conflicts more efficiently.

Put practice into print

The agreement-drafting process provides an opportunity to document how the collaboration can be managed successfully. Scientists, management, and legal staff or external experts should all be involved in the drafting process. Legal counsel should be constantly updated on individual and joint visions, joint work plans and respective roles and responsibilities. A sound document requires a high level of detail and a significant investment of time. Partners should recognize that agreements are 'living' documents. As such, they are likely to need renegotiating and/or amending from time to time to reflect new scientific or product delivery requirements or changes in the institutional relationship.

Conclusion

Partnerships are not always easy to maintain, but the rewards and achievements can be great. Experience has shown that successful collaboration is based on sharing a common vision, understanding individual strengths, clearly identifying roles and responsibilities, addressing potential conflicts in the spirit of keeping the common vision alive, and taking the time to draft sound agreements that provide the necessary support to sustain the partnership.

Further reading

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