

SIX LESSONS LEARNED IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THEIR APPLICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF COLLABORATIVE TEXAS-MEXICO AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Six international development lessons and their underlying philosophical themes are presented as postulates, and examples of their application in Texas-Mexico agricultural development are presented. They are influenced by the author's 22 years of experiences in three development settings – an international agricultural research center, an international foundation, and a land-grant university. The six lessons are: there must be (1) dialogue between experts from both Mexico and Texas in determining the issues that are to be addressed; (2) representation from the groups that will ultimately benefit from joint efforts at all steps of the process; (3) sharing of costs for every activity that is conducted; (4) a marketing component in all projects, whenever possible; (5) student involvement at every opportunity; and (6) joint evaluation of outcomes for policy impact.

These lessons are serving as a foundation for interaction and bi-national collaboration between The Agriculture Program of the Texas A&M University System and a consortium of universities, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and producer associations from northeast Mexico.

Fourteen completed and eight on-going bi-national projects, funded largely by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, abide by these lessons. This paper should be useful to educators who have interests in development work with Mexico or with other countries with whom travel and communication is easy and for which cross cultural factors exist. It also sets a framework for developing proposals that may increase their competitiveness with donors who not only want to support projects that are comprehensive and interdisciplinary but also have potential for informing policy setters.

Introduction

Lessons learned about international development and their application in the context of agricultural research, development and education between Texas and Mexico, are influenced by the author's 22 years of experiences in three types of development settings. From 1978 to 1989, the author directed the training program and communications and documentation services of the International Potato Center (CIP) headquartered in Lima, Peru. During this time CIP had formal collaborative research and training agreements with approximately 80 developing countries around the world. From 1989 to 1993, the author was a program director for agriculture and rural development with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. In this capacity, the author reviewed and recommended proposals for approval, and managed and evaluated approximately 30 projects in the U.S. and Latin America. Since 1993, he has been developing and managing special projects for The Agriculture Program of The Texas A&M University System, with special emphasis on development that is of mutual benefit to rural residents of the Texas-Mexico borderlands. This work has been made possible principally through funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

After developing a strategy for mutually beneficial research, education, and development work with Mexico, 14 bi-national research and development projects were completed from 1993 to 1999. Fifty-four faculty members from the Texas A&M Agriculture Program collaborated with 35 counterparts from various universities and the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas, y Pecuarias from Mexico (Annual Progress Report, 1998). In 2000, eight bi-national projects were initiated through an effort led by the Center for Grazinglands and Ranch Management (CGRM) of Texas A&M University. CGRM is composed of faculty members from the 14 academic departments of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences of Texas A&M University. Nine faculty members from the College are co-principal investigators with eight counterparts from the Technical Consortium from Northeast Mexico (Consortio Técnico del Noreste del País) (Consortium). The Consortium is a legally constituted and recognized organization composed of five universities, research and development governmental and non-governmental organizations, and producer associations from northeast Mexico. Each project will include other partners from Texas and Mexico.

The experiences gained have been translated into six important lessons that are being applied in The Agriculture Program's collaborative development initiatives with Mexico. The lessons are: there must be (1) dialogue between experts from Mexico and Texas in determining the issues that are to be addressed; (2) representation from the groups that will ultimately benefit from joint efforts at all steps of the process; (3) sharing of costs for every activity that is conducted; (4) a marketing component in all projects, whenever possible; (5) student involvement at every opportunity; and (6) joint evaluation of outcomes for policy impact. Following a description of each lesson (philosophical theme), a brief application is given of how the lesson has been applied in current research, development, and education bi-national projects between the CGRM and the Consortium from northeast Mexico.

Purpose of Paper

The purpose of this paper is to share how six lessons learned over a 22-year period in international development are being applied in a collaborative and mutually beneficial initiative involving universities, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and producer associations from both sides of the Texas-Mexico border.

Philosophical Themes

- (1) Dialogue between experts from both Mexico and Texas in determining the issues that are to be addressed. In development work, it appears that there is a tendency to take a “north-south” attitude, i.e., technology from the north is superior to that in the south or, said another way, we know what is best for them because it works for us. What was found is that there is ample expertise in every country in which the author worked. However, many times, due to low salaries in “agriculture” well-trained scientists work in non-agricultural fields or are employed by agencies or universities with limited or no funding for research and development. Many of these scientists have completed undergraduate and graduate degrees from prestigious universities in the U.S. and other developed nations. The task is to encourage and facilitate national counterparts to identify these well-trained individuals and engage them in ascertaining problem areas that merit attention. Areas of common interest must not only be sought but also mechanisms for involving all potential partners to address these areas in collaborative and mutually-benefiting ways, and in developing quality proposals for external funding to carry this work out, must be explored.

Application: During 1998 and 2000, the CGRM and the Consortium organized and conducted five bi-national workshops. Three of the workshops were conducted in Mexico; two were in Texas. Four technical workshops focused on (1) livestock production systems, (2) conservation of natural resources and livestock marketing systems, (3) management of grazinglands, and (4) wildlife management. The fifth workshop was to synthesize major outcomes from the four technical workshops and finalize a proposal for improvement of forage-based production systems and socio-economic conditions in south Texas and northeast Mexico.

An executive committee composed of leaders from the CGRM and the Consortium identified experts from Texas and Mexico to serve on planning committees for each of the workshops. The planning committees selected the most important topics that were to be addressed and identified experts from Texas and Mexico to address each of the topics. An expert from Texas and one from Mexico addressed each topic. In some cases, joint papers and presentations were made; in other cases there were separate papers and presentations. In all cases, there was interaction and exchange of information between experts in preparing the papers and presentations.

There were 49 presentations in the four technical workshops. This included 49 co-presenters from Texas and 56 co-presenters from Mexico. These experts came from 17

different institutions from Texas and Mexico. Each topic was presented in either English or Spanish and simultaneously translated to the other language. Proceedings for each workshop were published before each workshop in English and Spanish (Proceedings).

- (2) Representation from the groups that will ultimately benefit from joint efforts at all steps of the process. Too many times, problem areas that have been targeted have either been identified up to 10 years prior to the submission of requests for proposals or have only marginally involved potential beneficiaries of the projects in their execution. In many cases, it appears that the problems that are being addressed have either been replaced by other more severe problems, intended recipients of the benefits of the projects have forgotten that they were asked, or there are now new potential recipients facing the same original problems. In nearly all cases, there are gaps in their participation in the development or implementation and their absence is likely to be more evident in the evaluation of outcomes. Representatives of the intended beneficiaries should be involved in all steps of the projects that are developed, carried out, and evaluated.

Application: The four technical workshops were intended to (1) exchange latest information about topics of common interest between experts, synthesize this information, and share it with producers from both sides of the Texas-Mexico border in terms that they could readily understand and apply; (2) promote interaction and discussion among the participants, i.e., principally between producers and experts from the various institutions from Texas and Mexico; and (3) enable the participants, primarily the producers, to provide input to short- and long-term research, extension, and education needs. The goal was to gain as much input as possible to develop a longer term and sustainable bi-national effort.

Each workshop was designed to disseminate technical information through traditional presentations in auditorium settings. Then, each workshop included activities to promote informal interaction between and among participants, through such activities as a computer-based farm management session, a hands-on demonstration, and field days. Finally, participants worked in small groups to reflect on what they had been exposed to and to suggest short-term research, extension, or educational activities that could be undertaken with existent resources and undertaken in the longer term with additional resources. This input was captured and recorded by the executive and planning committees immediately after each workshop.

The fifth workshop focused on synthesizing the inputs received from the participants in the workshops and finalizing a comprehensive proposal. The proposal is composed of eight objectives to be completed in a five-year period and is intended to address issues that are of importance to producers on both sides of the Texas-Mexico border.

There were a total of 865 registered participants in the five workshops. Approximately, 400 were producers from Texas and Mexico. The rest were faculty and students from universities and personnel from governmental and non-governmental organizations (Piña, 1998, 1998, 1999, 1999, 2000).

- (3) Sharing of costs for every activity that is conducted: In our enthusiasm to show results as quickly as possible, often in unrealistic times, the inclination is to cover all expenses with project funds to expedite activities and participation. Often times, the donors place unrealistic expectations in the timeframe of the projects they fund. It is fundamentally important that potential beneficiaries and all partners cover partially their research, training, and development costs. If this is not done, the collaborative activities are not valued and, in reality, there is no collaboration. To achieve this goal, however, requires a clear vision of what is expected and patience and perseverance to insure that development groups are not pressured to cover all costs for the sake of harmony with national partners or the interest of a donor to see quick results from their investment.

Application: In building relationships with potential partners from Mexico, the A&M Agriculture Program consistently made it clear that it did not have funds to cover bi-national efforts, that common interest areas would have to be identified and funds sought as partners to address priority issues together. This was the foundation on which the first 14 collaborative projects were built. Although project funds were used for collaborative efforts, recipients of those funds had to contribute matching support, which was largely in-kind. This approach was carried over in the relationship that developed between the CGRM and the Consortium. All costs for communications, planning meetings, and the workshops were borne by the partner institutions. No costs incurred by institutions from Mexico were covered by the CGRM. For example, travel costs of A&M Program faculty that presented in the workshops in Mexico were covered by the CGRM while travel costs for counterparts from Mexico for workshops in Texas were covered by their respective institutions.

Further, in the current set of eight bi-national projects each project has been awarded \$5,000 to start activities for accomplishing the eight objectives of the long-term effort. The funds are allocated to a CGRM member department provided that that department contributes a direct match of 50 percent (\$2,500) and the partner institution from the Consortium provides an equal direct match of 50 percent (\$2,500). Therefore, each project has a total of \$10,000 for its activities.

It should be noted that six of the eight projects received their \$5,000 grant from a project sponsored by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation whereas two projects received their \$5,000 grants from the A&M Agriculture Program and the Unión Ganadera Regional de Nuevo León, a member institution of the Consortium.

Of interest is the fact that the co-principal investigators from Texas in the set of 14 projects reported leveraging \$104,800 from other external sources while the co-principal investigators from Mexico reported leveraging \$424,225 (Annual Progress Report). The same experience is expected with the current set of eight projects.

- (4) Marketing component in all projects, whenever possible: Fundamentally, development or “improving the quality of people’s lives” is dependent on economic development. Without added income to purchase the goods and services that enable an improved quality of life, development efforts may only make life a bit easier by taking away some

of the pain of living in substandard conditions. Therefore, whenever possible, research, education, and development efforts should be linked to improving income. As such, the inclusion of marketing components in all project activities must be considered and explored. Sometimes, research contributes to the principal investigators' promotion and tenure and is conducted under the guise of development research, with little or no possibility of ever reaching an end beneficiary in such a way that it morphs income.

Application: All eight of the currently funded bi-national projects include an economic impact analysis, and it is even more prominent in the longer proposal for which funding is being sought. Furthermore, in 1999, the CGRM and the Consortium, in collaboration with each other, submitted two proposals to the Fondo Regional de Tecnologia Agropecuaria based at the Interamerican Development Bank. Both included strong sections on marketing and economic analysis (Proposals).

- (5) Student involvement at every opportunity: Development requires long-term and sustained efforts. It requires not only the participation of mature and recognized leaders from the U.S. and a targeted partner country but also the involvement of young people, i.e., students. The author feels that it is a greater challenge to change the attitudes, beliefs, and values of older people than to influence the way young people perceive things. Development projects are excellent opportunities for students to experience development efforts and to interact with people, particularly other young people, who may be a bit different from them. Such experiences also heighten the importance of possessing skills with a language other than their own native language. The author envisions the day when every international interaction will include the participation of students at every step.

Application: To date, four graduate and two undergraduate students from the A&M Agriculture Program have been intimately involved in the activities led by the CGRM. One graduate student conducted research and wrote a thesis on the major sources of information used by livestock producers in the state of Nuevo León (Freund, 1999). Another graduate student is conducting research on the governmental and non-governmental organizations that perform extension-type activities in south Texas, Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila. Also, during this time, the Department of Modern and Classical Languages, received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, to establish a Spanish language certificate program for undergraduate students in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Texas A&M University. This program requires that students take a course in Spanish taught by A&M faculty in Mexico, and encourages students to participate in internships at the same time (Proposal).

- (6) Joint evaluation of outcomes for policy impact: Regardless of the source of funding for a development project, what partner attracted the funding, or where the principal investigator is from, it is fundamentally important that all who are involved in a project are accountable for its outcomes. This is particularly important if the intent is to have a long-lasting impact on the external conditions in which a project is being carried out. Evaluation is not the sole responsibility of a single external evaluator; it is the responsibility of the team of individuals associated with a project. In this context,

formative evaluation is extremely important as it enables making adjustments as a project evolves. Furthermore, in order to inform policy related to the problems being addressed a sound communication plan to complement the evaluation/dissemination process is extremely important. Policy and decision-makers and key opinion leaders must be informed about policies, rules, and regulations that often impinge on development.

Application: Toward the end of the completion of the set of 14 projects, a networking conference of all the principal investigators from Texas and Mexico was held to share outcomes and lessons learned in carrying out the projects. In the relationship between the CGRM and the Consortium, the bi-national executive committee meets quarterly to review progress and plan next steps. Additionally, all principal investigators will meet as a group with the executive committee in the early stages of their projects. At the end of the first year the principal investigators will share their outcomes in a networking conference with producers from across the targeted region. Special attention will be given to inviting key policy setters and opinion leaders from the region to this conference. This series of interactions are intended to enable making mid-course corrections as necessary; it is a formative evaluation process in which all that are involved in the project are responsible for its outcomes. Throughout this process special attention will be given to disseminating outcomes from the projects via mass media as well as academic outlets.

Conclusions

The six lessons presented can be the basis for postulates that can guide others who have interests in collaborative and mutually beneficial development work in cross-cultural environments. The lessons, learned by the author in the past 22 years of international development work, are serving as a foundation for interaction and bi-national collaboration between The Agriculture Program of the Texas A&M University System, through the Center for Grazinglands and Ranch Management, and counterparts in Mexico, through the Technical Consortium from Northeast Mexico. Currently, mini-challenge grant proposals that are being supported with partial external support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation are heeding the lessons learned.

However, it must be recognized that to get to this point requires a clear vision of development work in a bi-national context, patience in working with faculty from a variety of disciplines and experiences, building a relationship with a counterpart group, and creating a shared vision of what is expected from the relationship. It also requires true collaboration in sharing responsibilities and costs throughout the process.

Furthermore, it is important to recognize that while impact can be had at the community or work level, unless the external conditions that caused the problems to occur are addressed, there will be little long-lasting impact. In other words, public policies must be influenced.

Educational Importance

This paper should be useful to educators who have interests in development work with Mexico or with other countries with whom travel and communication is relatively easy. It

points out six succinct lessons that can be expanded upon and discussed in such a way that a series of other lessons related to each can be studied. In addition, this paper shows that true collaboration resulting in effective development can be developed between and among institutions and organizations in cross-cultural settings. It also sets a framework for developing proposals that may increase their competitiveness with donors who have similar interests but who want to support projects that are comprehensive in nature, i.e., that extend beyond traditional approaches to development and deal with broader concerns, such as policy.

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