

WHAT NEXT FOR AGRICORD AS A NETWORK OF AGRI-AGENCIES?

Conclusions of a facilitation for the update of the vision and mission of AgriCord

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A debate has been ongoing within Agricord on new vision/mission statement and on the desirable institutional evolution of the network. Such a reflection is welcome considering major changes in the overall context for international cooperation (including funding) as well as the challenge faced by Agricord in terms of consolidating the network to ensure its continuing relevance and impact. 2011 seems to be a critical juncture for Agricord and the right moment to make clear choices as to the next face of its institutional life cycle.

This short note may help to facilitate this process by making a number of observations and raising a few questions on possible future paths.

The growing importance of networks in international cooperation

1. The development sector is hugely fragmented, resulting in major transaction costs and inefficiencies. The Paris and Accra on aid effectiveness processes have tried to remedy this, with limited success so far. Yet other forces are changing our sector, new rules of the game are emerging, fuelled by increased competition among actors and pressures to show results and accountability. A more “market-driven” division of labour is gaining momentum and (global) networks are an important feature of the new landscape.
2. *On paper*, networks present a number of key advantages as development actor as they may display a greater capacity (as group) :
 - mobilise actors, to be an interlocutor and to influence policy
 - to produce relevant knowledge, including on innovative practices (= a major asset in an increasingly knowledge-driven cooperation sector)
 - to effectively deliver goods and services to key constituencies
 - to embrace the wider development agenda (development + global challenges and international public goods)
 - to realise economies of scale and reduce transaction costs
 - and through all this to have a ‘legitimacy’ as actor
3. Yet experience suggests that for this potential to be achieved, several conditions need to be in place:
 - a clear identity and purpose, based on common interests
 - a capacity to think ahead, plan strategically and use windows of opportunities to make a difference
 - a capacity to deliver real added value through collective action
 - solid ownership of members, reflected in a willingness to invest in the network and take responsibility for its institutional development

Agricord has been able to build an” acquis” since its inception

4. How does Agricord (as a network of agri-agencies) fit in this picture? Where does it stand after seven years of functioning?
5. It could be argued that considerable progress has been achieved in making the network a reality and a credible actor. Agricord can fall back on a certain “acquis” as reflected in following strengths:
 - *Legitimacy*: Agricord brings together northern CSOs, representative organisations and farmers and can pretend to be linked to the dynamics of farmer’s organisations in developing countries
 - *Homogenous group* coalescing around common interests and linked together through shared roots/structures/mandates/type of work
 - *Complementarities between agri-agencies* providing opportunities for joint action, stronger profiling/positioning and enhanced impact
 - *Track record*: the network succeeded in making a joint programme document, with shared objectives, work areas and deliverables.

Yet several things could be improved in the functioning of the network

6. The ongoing debate on Agricord’s evolution has brought to the surface a number of critical institutional factors that affect the functioning of the network and may reduce its capacity to fully use its potential. Key concerns arise with regard to
 - Willingness/capacity/incentives to act and learn together (= need for much more curiosity about each other and preparedness for joint action/learning)
 - Quality of internal communication (including in terms of translating Board decisions and intentions to colleagues and staff) and external communication (towards farmers’ constituencies, associated members)
 - Collective responsibility to search for funding (in an increasingly harsh and competitive environment)
 - Effective follow-up of agreements made jointly (the “acting together” remains too often at the level of intentions)
7. Such weaknesses are a recurrent feature in network structures in the development sector. They are part and parcel of networks as a “living body”. Yet at some stage these institutional bottlenecks need to be addressed upfront. Otherwise there is a risk that the network gradually loses momentum, ownership levels decline and the capacity for relevant collective action and effective delivery of an added value diminishes.

Scenario’s for the future evolution of Agricord

8. Three scenario’s could be considered for the future –each of them based on a different “political economy analysis” of what is feasible:
 - *Status quo*: this would mean only minor adjustments would be introduced in the overall functioning of the network in the coming years (e.g. in workplans, approaches, funding)

strategies). The focus would be on the minimum requirements” to keep a credible network. Such a scenario could prevail if the interests/expectations of members turn out to be too diverse to go further

- *Consolidation of the network through targeted reforms:* This scenario is more ambitious. It recognises the need for Agricord to evolve in order to stay relevant. Yet it also acknowledges that there are different levels of ambition within the group with regard to the network, so the required reforms should be carefully defined (through a joint feasibility analysis looking at interests, incentives and commitments of members). Innovations would mainly focus on finding new ways to “act” and “learn” together; to share/delegate work to staff within agri-agencies (internal funding, “one-for-all” work); to broaden the network by proposing different agendas (“principle of “géométrie variable”); and to intensify the search for smart funding.
- *Major leap forward.* This third scenario is based on the analysis that Agricord finds itself at a critical juncture. In order to enhance its overall profile, performance and impact it needs to go further than the reforms of scenario 2. The transformation amounts to a major “deepening” of the network in terms of strategy and organisational set-up. It is however doubtful that this option will gather sufficient support within the network.

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