

Metastructure for Agricultural Research and Development Projects

Executive Summary (Draft 11/1/07)

1) Concept:

Create an overarching framework for strategic decision-making regarding the relationship between research, experimentation and development projects on technology and social solutions to smallholder information needs. This overarching framework – or “metastructure” – would ensure ways to 1) make transparent the relationships between projects, 2) extract and share information and learning that could benefit multiple projects, and 3) coordinate activities that would create efficiencies and/or enhance the impact of projects.

2) Rationale:

Metastructure refers to the overarching framework that supplies rules regarding the relationship between projects within the 'frame.' In this case, the metastructure would help create synergies between projects to enhance mutual project impacts.

The World Agricultural Information Systems (WorldAgInfo) Project was tasked to identify funding opportunities to support information exchange, enhanced decision-making and the exercise of choice as new courses of action unfold for smallholder farmers. The project's Design Team has mapped the smallholder space to identify points of leverage where improved information access could have the most impact. The entire "information supply chain" was deemed critical in this regard.

The final product of the WorldAgInfo project will include a set of proposed high leverage initiatives aimed at various “links” in the information supply chain – from researchers to extension workers to smallholder farmers themselves. These initiatives will likely bear important strategic relationships to each other, for instance, their target audiences may overlap or their technology strategies to link smallholder farmers to information may be similar or mutually enhancing.

Even though the initiatives will be designed to have positive impact on the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in and of themselves, the impacts will likely be enhanced if grantees coordinate at a strategic level to create synergies. Many different organizations and individuals, organized in ad-hoc consortia, will be involved in implementing these initiatives. The initiatives themselves will evolve over time, as they incorporate feedback and learning. In this expanding and evolving landscape, it will be critical to share information and facilitate coordination to ensure that everyone involved understands the evolving relationships between initiatives and points for strategic coordination and information sharing to enhance the impact of the initiatives.

The metastructure would provide a dynamic framework and tools for grantees, but open to other initiatives as well to create synergies between projects. The dynamic framework would help people involved in implementing WorldAgInfo and other related initiatives understand the evolving relationships between them. The tools provided by the metastructure would allow grantees to share information and discuss implications on an ongoing basis.

3) Evidence the project can be successful:

There have been numerous examples of grantee conferences where lessons and information are shared and relationships are built. There is also increasing evidence that virtual communities can be effective, for instance if they use interactive web-based tools to allow for sharing of information and learning on an ongoing basis. Providing a systematic Metastructure for Agricultural Research and Development Projects will provide feedback and allow for cross-project synergies at relatively low cost.

4) Expected benefits of the project:

- Efficient sharing of information for strategic decision-making.
- Improving the quality of the projects by sharing lessons about successes and failures.
- Creating transparency in project implementation and success.

Sustainability and Scale

The metastructure would initially be funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. If organizations involved in the WorldAgInfo initiatives feel that the structure continues to provide value over time, they should provide resources to support the metastructure.

The metastructure can be scaled to create synergies to other relevant initiatives, for instance FAO's e-Agriculture project.

Providing a systematic Metastructure for Agricultural Research and Development Projects will provide ongoing, systematic opportunities for synergism. The metastructure could also be equipped with resources for additional funding for cooperative initiatives.

5) Projected costs of the project:

Staff support to facilitate dialogue and information sharing, and to develop tools

Periodic in-person meetings, as needed

Web-development, software and server space

Challenge grants to encourage cooperation

Feedback, evaluation, and redirection funds

6) Measures of success:

Initiatives are fully aware of activities of other relevant initiatives and make strategic decisions to improve effectiveness and avoid duplication

Synergies between initiatives are identified and action taken to capitalize on synergies

Initiatives take ownership of the metastructure and provide ongoing support

7) Risks:

Incentives to devote time and effort to sharing information either on-line or in person

Possible need to provide training, tech support and funding to staff of initiatives to ensure their ability and willingness to use tools for sharing information (related to first item)

Who manages the structure and to whom are they accountable

Overcoming reluctance to share information exposing weaknesses or to share competitive advantage