

Challenges for upscaling technologies and institutions

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Plant breeding initiatives worldwide have proven particularly ineffective to deliver poor farmers with quality and good-yielding materials that would improve their livelihoods and food security. Because of this Participatory Plant Breeding (PPB) has become a complementary option that takes into account farmers' wants and needs, bridging the gap between formal R&D and the more popular knowledge-based initiatives that address plant variety development and seed diffusion. Since 2005, farmers participating in a PPB pilot project in Pueblo Nuevo (Nicaragua) produced two red-bean varieties well adapted to the area. They intended to register them in the respective Ministry, to earn a profit from selling certified seeds. For this reason they organized in a cooperative, with the help of an accompanying NGO.

In trying to shed some light to the problematic of promoting a successful seed supply to and by small-scale farmers, an ethnographic study was done in Northern Nicaragua with a seed-producing cooperative as the main object of study. The intention was to diagnose the situation inside the organization which would prevent it from overcoming the obstacles for commercializing seeds at the local and regional levels, as well as those preventing PPB to become more widespread and used by farmers to secure this much needed input. Thus, identifying such challenges through a realistic evaluation of this pilot project is what this report is about.

Perceptions about the cooperative were recorded with members of the cooperative, as well as with other actors that interplay with it (governmental and non-governmental). There are internal and external factors that may be conditioning for a successful upscaling of the seeds; considering the market-orientation of the approach and recent political changes taking place in Nicaragua. Thus, clear objectives and collective vision are essential to strengthen the cooperative, as well as the possibilities for earning a profit in a stable way.

Some actors think it may be hard to keep a constant offer of seeds and variety quality, and others seem to be still very dependent of the initiatives taken by the accompanying/funding organization. Giving perhaps little thought to the initial objective of supplying material that would yield higher and be resistant to a viral disease, the cooperative has lately focused more on entering a formal market. Important resources should be invested for diversifying its services (i.e. providing seed of commercial varieties to the market), while still supplying local farmers with these adapted materials in more informal ways.

Amidst this scenario is where the actions determined by cooperative COSENUP, as well as its relation with members, partners, business associates, and the attention paid to the legal matters and the market will determine a positive outcome and a potentially sustainable production and distribution of seeds for resource-poor farmers in the Segovias region and beyond.

This study addresses the questions of identifying “the major bottlenecks for the upscaling of PPB-seeds?” and “what challenges does PPB face in order to become established as a farmer’s practice?”