

FOSTERING COLLABORATION in cross-CGIAR research projects and platforms: Lessons from the GENNOVATE initiative



Photo: Women's focus group in DR Congo. Bioversity Int. Photo: Anne Rietveld.

“GENNOVATE: Enabling gender equality in agricultural and environmental innovation” is a collaborative study that represents an unprecedented initiative in the CGIAR in its scale and comprehensiveness for examining gender norms, agency, and capacities for innovations. A qualitative study, it brings to life the voices, challenges, and aspirations of local people differentiated by gender, socioeconomic class, and generation under diverse cultures, religions, ecological circumstances, and agricultural systems. The research design was developed collaboratively, and Principal Investigators (PIs) from

nearly all CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs) contributed substantively to the study. GENNOVATE was initiated from the bottom up in 2013 among CGIAR and associated gender researchers, and was made possible through funding support from CGIAR Trust Fund Donors, the CRPs, the CGIAR Gender and Agricultural Research Network, the World Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the governments of Germany and Mexico.

One unique aspect of GENNOVATE is its ability to catalyze collaboration: It brought together a multidisciplinary team of researchers across the

CRPs and enabled them to carry out a study that covers the many regions where the CGIAR is active. GENNOVATE researchers worked with 137 agricultural communities from [26 countries](#) across the Global South. In this way, the initiative moved beyond the small, isolated studies which have characterized much gender case research towards real time comparisons across many qualitative cases. This has allowed for new patterns to emerge while maintaining emphasis on contextual specificity. The success of the study has rested considerably in its driving principles of systematic collaboration and learning.

As it enters its fifth year, the GENNOVATE research community shares lessons learned and success factors for other types of collaboration.

This note offers reflections on:

- The value—and value added—of the collaboration.
- Challenges with the collaboration.
- Good practices for other collaborative research efforts.

Four types of collaborations were prominent within the GENNOVATE initiative:

- 1) Among PIs and their research teams across the CGIAR;
- 2) Among CGIAR PIs, other PIs (gender scholars and consultants), and resource persons;
- 3) With partner organizations and field teams responsible for data collection across study sites;
- 4) At the village level between the research field teams, women and men farmers (young and adult), and other diverse community members.

In this note, we reflect primarily on the first two types of collaboration, offering insights to Platforms, CRPs, and other collaborative research endeavors in the CGIAR.

Box 1 lists some of the key collaborative activities and outputs from GENNOVATE. Although a loose timeline is provided to offer a sense of flow and consolidation of the collaboration over time, activities were in fact highly iterative and often occurred in parallel, over more than one year.

Box 1: Key collaborative aspects and activities of the GENNOVATE initiative

- 2013**
 - Agreement among small group of CGIAR gender researchers of the need for a large-scale gender research initiative using qualitative tools to examine how gender norms and agency affect agricultural innovation processes.
 - Expanded group of PIs discuss collaborative, conceptual, and methodological aspects of the comparative study. Development of concept note. Formation of Executive Committee.
 - Hiring of Global Study Advisor to lead the development of a shared methodology, with inputs from PIs and several resource persons.
- 2014**
 - Piloting and refinement of methodology in Mexico and subsequently in Uganda.
 - Launch of collaboration mechanisms and ground rules.
 - Trainings of trainers (field team leaders) on data collection methodology.
 - Formation and training of national research partnerships and field teams.
 - Data collection begins. Production of qualitative data presented as typed notes from each case study and analyzed in comprehensive case synthesis reports.
- 2015**
 - Development of coding tree.
 - Expansion of Executive Committee.
 - Recruitment and training of coders based in two hubs: Mexico (CIMMYT) and Peru (CIP).
 - Coding of data begins. Central teams of coders return coded data to PIs overseeing each case study.
 - Intensification of Executive Committee interactions internally and with PI team via Skype and face-to-face meetings.
- 2016**
 - Formalization and endorsement by participating Centers of collaboration modality and data-sharing agreements.
 - Regular global and regional workshops to strengthen skills in qualitative data analysis and use of NVivo, and for knowledge sharing and peer-review of analyses and presentations.
- 2017**
 - GENNOVATE presentation of study at CGIAR Science Leaders' meeting.
 - Development of collaborative reports and papers, including a special issue on gender norms and innovation in the journal *Gender, Agriculture and Food Security*, and a series of GENNOVATE resources for scientists and research teams.
 - GENNOVATE session at CGIAR Gender Platform conference with presentations by several PIs.
- 2018**
 - Sharing of outcomes, follow-up initiatives, lessons learnt, and individual assessments of the collaborative process at closing workshop.
- 2018-...**
 - Collaboration continues

Value – and value added – of the collaboration

According to PIs, the value of the collaboration was on several levels:

Enhanced scientific opportunities, achievements, and outcomes

Teamwork and collaboration:

- Contributed to more rigorous and relevant research on a large scale.
- Brought different ideas and perspectives to the fore and fostered intellectual exchanges in a safe environment as well as a forum for open dialogue. External resource persons (from non-CGIAR organizations) brought invaluable knowledge to bear on the study and helped increase the relevance of the study.
- Fostered methodological and conceptual innovations, especially the chance to develop and apply a rigorous, qualitative methodology for a comparative study.
- Allowed abundant and rich data that is both comparable yet contextualized to be collected from men and women producers from different classes and generations, and of diverse cultures, religions, ecological circumstances, and agricultural systems. Discussions among PIs amplified the interpretive power directed towards data as contextual specificities and commonalities were brought into view.
- Allowed participating scientists to pioneer a qualitative comparative methodology in a way that none of the PIs could have done on their own.
- Resulted in multiple, diverse outputs, ranging from reports, presentations, and articles to methodology tools and data—many of which were integrated in other CGIAR research projects—as well as follow-up (Ph.D.) research projects. More research outputs were produced than originally envisioned as collaboration led to the generation of new ideas throughout the initiative.
- Mobilized funding and ongoing support across the CGIAR.



GENNOVATE fieldwork in Nepal. Photo: Marlène Elias, Bioversity International.

- Made a significant contribution to CG gender research and networks through wide-ranging expert cooperation, innovations with gender-responsive methodologies, and expansion of the gender knowledge base. This contribution was recognized in the System-wide 2017 Evaluation of Gender in CGIAR, led by the Independent Evaluation Arrangement (IEA).
- Enhanced the scientific foundation and engagement for considering gender norms and integrating gender aspects and qualitative methodologies in research and development interventions across CRPs and throughout the CG system.
- Increased exposure of the study beyond the CGIAR researchers involved due to the scale of the initiative and the number of 'spokespersons' and research products. External resource persons and partners brought some of the thinking from the initiative back into their institutions.

Capacity strengthening

- Collaboration enabled enhanced interactions between junior and senior researchers as well as mentorship; and proved to be an effective way to strengthen capacities through knowledge sharing around practical experience and contrasting disciplinary backgrounds.
- External resource persons contributed to strengthening capacities of staff within the CGIAR.
- Regular GENNOVATE workshops allowed the team to i) strengthen both 'soft' and 'hard' skills, such as in the use of a qualitative data analysis program (NVivo) and ii) develop a forum for enhanced capacity and critical thinking around how to ensure rigor and thus quality of qualitative research, and the role/potential and challenges of qualitative research in the context of the CGIAR and agricultural research for development (AR4D). Structured discussions and presentations during workshops allowed participants to benefit from peer review of their research and to raise issues for reflection. Related informal down-time discussions further contributed to strengthening the quality, and confidence in, qualitative research and findings. Pressure for quality resulted in better quality research.

Implementation efficiencies

- Efficiencies resulted from collectively designing the shared GENNOVATE methodology, organizing trainings of lead national field researchers for multiple field teams for the data collection, and strengthening capacities of multiple PIs in data collection, analysis, and writing of major findings.
- In the context of open access policies, a common approach and agreements were developed to share and manage data ethically, given the type of data collected (narrative data on sensitive topics elicited from human subjects rather than statistical or biophysical data).
- As a result of GENNOVATE work on ethical handling of sensitive data, some of the CGIAR Centers strengthened their open access data management approaches.
- Having a large number of cases to code reduced costs per case, as it was possible to train two central teams of coders, based in Mexico and Peru, to code all cases. Importantly, this also allowed for enhanced inter-coder reliability (minimizing differences in interpretation that different people bring to the coding), and allowed teams to benefit from the growing experience of the coders as the coding progressed.

Moral and intellectual support, networks, and friendships

- Positive feedback from colleagues within the GENNOVATE network encouraged scientists to keep going when back at the desk, even in the absence of funding to cover their time in the study.
- Friendships and intellectual support, and the sense of being part of a large initiative and community, offered strength in the face of institutional challenges and politics.

Challenges of the collaboration

The following challenges to collaboration were encountered during the life of the project:

- Lack of researcher time, as funding was limited and short term. Many PIs had no time formally allocated in their work plans for GENNOVATE data collection, analysis, and write up, or even for participation in workshops.
- The need to balance inclusive decision making with timely decisions and moderate transaction costs, as well as the time and efforts required to produce team deliverables.
- Ensuring high quality data collection, analysis, presentation of findings, and outreach across the initiative with researchers and research teams (PIs, partners, field teams) of varied experience levels and strengths.
- Authorship and data sharing—see Box 2. PIs and resource persons worked together and shared knowledge and ideas over several years, with some PIs leaving and new ones coming in. In some cases the origin and originator of specific ideas became blurred. This had to be taken into account and discussed when it came to publishing articles.
- Maintaining efficient and multidirectional information flows and feedback loops among all the parties involved, while managing transaction costs.
- Unequal carrying of responsibilities and engagement across PIs, and non-responsiveness or lack of timely responses of some.
- Occasional turnover of people involved in the collaboration, as people moved to other work or organizations, leaving some researchers interpreting data, which they did not collect.
- Because data collection teams worked on different timelines, time lags or bottlenecks sometimes occurred, e.g., in relation to data coding, or joint analysis and write-up.
- Different visions or hopes for GENNOVATE among PIs and over time.

Recognition of the value of the collaboration, described above, helped researchers work through these challenges more readily and identify some of the solutions listed in the next section.

Box 2: Data sharing and authorship

Due to the comparative nature of the study, PIs were very interested in sharing their own teams' data. At the same time, they wanted to maintain control over the data and its interpretations and give/receive credit where it was due. To address these and other concerns regarding data sharing, a joint collaboration agreement (available upon request) was established and formalized. This included data sharing and authorship principles and procedures aligned with CGIAR and donor standards. It was agreed that using the data of another PI would entail joint authorship of the research output, unless the PI who oversaw the case chose to decline authorship. This was done to recognize the PI's work in the shared case study and to validate interpretations of the data with the PI's knowledge of the context for the case at hand. Data management rules were established. For example, all data had to be safeguarded confidentially by the center with which its PI is affiliated, and access to data collected by PIs from other Centers had to be formally documented using the GENNOVATE data-sharing agreement and template (available upon request) with clear indication of the specific purpose for which data access was being granted.



Piloting GENNOVATE in Mexico.
Photo: CIMMYT.

Good practices for collaborative research

Several lessons from the GENNOVATE initiative may offer good practices that can contribute to fruitful research collaboration:

Resource allocation

- ✓ Find ways to provide an agreed minimum of staff time to support participation, engagement, and commitment of team members or partners to a minimum of expected deliverables and effective engagement in the collaboration.

Team or partnership composition and external support

- ✓ Engage committed senior and junior scientists in the initiative and invite a diversity of other contributors who can bring different perspectives, learn from each other, and give the initiative a voice within and beyond the CGIAR.
- ✓ Establish a dedicated, diverse, and inclusive leadership team, and a clear governance approach, for example in the form of a project charter, to ensure efficient and transparent management and implementation.
- ✓ Garner the recognition and buy-in of research directors and senior managers by organizing important meetings in participating Centers, on a rotating basis, and inviting participation by these senior managers. This will strengthen their awareness, support, and advocacy for resources and visibility.
- ✓ Create an external scientific committee and/or invite external experts to meetings to inject new ideas and provide critical feedback.
- ✓ Engage early on with decision-makers and partners who can help shape the agenda and adopt the findings.

Process

- ✓ Invest in a robust research process to set the stage for strong products. Skilled steering and advance preparatory work by a core group is needed to provide the foundation for effective teamwork; as is the process of ongoing bottom-up exchange and peer-based capacity building for ongoing engagement and high quality outputs.
- ✓ Virtual interactions do not replace face-to-face meetings. It is difficult to have meaningful relationships and discussions without some face-to-face interaction. Allocate space, time, and funds for

collective sharing, learning, and reflection as well as informal interactions that foster a safe and stimulating environment for cooperation, building strong relations, ongoing engagement, mutual support, and creativity, diversity, and quality.

- ✓ Agree on timelines and arrangements in order to minimize bottlenecks and respect each other's time.
- ✓ Clarify (with a long-term vision) the conditions and working arrangements of the collaboration, as well as the procedures for data ownership, management, and sharing, and those around authorship from the very beginning of the initiative. Dedicate time to revisiting those issues at meetings, talk through doubts and concerns, and allow for adaptations as needed. This will help increase collective adherence to agreements.
- ✓ Share responsibilities equitably. In some cases, rotating management and leadership responsibilities within the management team and larger group may be useful for longer-term collaborations.
- ✓ Invest in strong communications mechanisms to keep all engaged and well informed, promoting transparency. Establish a regular schedule of face-to-face meetings alongside virtual correspondence to maintain the initiative high on everyone's agenda.
- ✓ Within face-to-face meetings, ensure space for 'sharing and transparency sessions' to enable both participants and organizers to constructively voice positive and negative feedback about specific decisions and directions of the initiative and levels of participation. This can generate discussions about information and resource flows, which are frequent bottlenecks and can resolve many issues when they are still small scale.
- ✓ Provide ample and constructive peer-to-peer review and feedback on written and oral presentations of the work.
- ✓ Recognize, appreciate, and acknowledge each other's contributions and reference each other's work to give visibility to the collective initiative.

These good practices can guide future collaborative endeavors and improve the ability of researchers to contribute to larger research questions and global challenges.



Some of the GENNOVATE PIs at the workshop on research achievements, lessons learned and emerging outcomes. Amsterdam, June 2018. Photo: CIMMYT

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To learn more visit:

gender.cgiar.org/collaborative-research/gennovate/

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