

Lessons for Local Solutions : Common Ground Experiences

from AET Institutional Transformation

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Executive Summary

In order to promote food security, USAID and other donors have been making investments to strengthen AET institutions and investigating alternative strategies to improve programming. In support of this endeavor, the Innovation for Agricultural Training and Education (InnovATE) project hosted a design review workshop of current or recently completed AET institutional development projects. This workshop promoted interaction among AET project partners who compared their experiences and examined the challenges, successes and lessons learned.

The objective of the workshop was to document tacit knowledge and lessons learned to inform policies and recommendations for the transformation of agricultural education and training (AET) institutions for sustained and entrepreneurial youth workforce development. Workshop participants included USAID mission and headquarters representatives, implementing university and NGO partners, and host institution representatives.

The application of design thinking principles ensured rich discussions. Design thinking takes into account multiple options and perspectives, ensuring that improved practices are acceptable to system actors for which they have been designed. Through iterative interaction, system actors engage in a dialog producing successive approximations to identify and implement mutually acceptable solutions. This approach is consistent with innovATE's Learn-Design-Train model:

- collective assessment of local AET needs and assumptions;
- reflection, design and innovative strategy development; and
- sharing of effective principles, practices, and experiences that renew the cyclical learn-design-train process.

Workshop Organization

Workshop activities were organized in two phases. A pre-workshop dialog engaged seventeen key individuals (AET advisors, project implementers and host institution representatives) selected from among those with considerable hands-on experience with USAID AET-based projects. Each of these individuals addressed the following questions during extended telephone interviews:

- What are the critical challenges you have faced in the process of implementing AET institutional transformation projects?
- What was done (successfully and unsuccessfully) to address them?
- What can be done to enhance AET institutional transformation projects in the future?

The conversations were free flowing and began by targeting specific AET experiences. Each interviewee had priority messages to convey, then they were asked to expand on a particular theme or two with examples highlighting personal insights. In twos and threes, the experts continued these informal discussions via Skype. A core of Conversation Co-Leaders took shape to lead the workshop.

The second phase of the workshop involved more participants and face-to-face conversations. To maintain the intimate and informal level of discussion, workshop attendance was limited to about fifty invitees including the

Conversation Co-Leaders. The Design Review Workshop itself was held in June 2016. These proceedings summarize the tacit knowledge and lessons learned gleaned from those conversations.

Workshop Findings

The conversations held during this workshop were structured according to expert identified themes. Conversation Co-Leaders led five Workshop Thematic Sessions:

- Trust and Partnerships;
- National AET System Transformation;
- Curriculum Development and Pedagogical Reform;
- Budget and Contracting Relationships; and
- Governance and Leadership.

Intertwining Threads:

Three ideas were interwoven throughout the conversations:

- context
- trust
- time

Context matters. Taking local conditions (culture, infrastructure, capabilities, resources, and idiosyncrasies) into account means that introducing specific practices or techniques is not as critical as how they are adapted in the particular situation. Trust is the essential element that binds effective development relationships. Trust builds from individual, face-to-face relationships, but makes the greatest impact when it is manifested in formal agreements, contracts and accountability mechanisms. However, setbacks can occur and trust must be rebuilt. Successful institutional transformation takes time. It is not a linear process, but involves the give-and-take of bringing partners on board, negotiating operational relationships, and mutually testing and implementing a feasible plan of action. This means that pressure for immediate, quantitative results is counter-productive.

Stakeholder Relationships: Stakeholders are central to understanding and effectively negotiating the local context. The quality of stakeholder relationships is critical to sustained improvements in AET. Stakeholders are the AET leaders and champions. They mobilize local resources and provide political support including inter-ministerial coordination, institutional commitment, and employee morale. Everyone agreed that leadership matters.

A consensus also emerged around the idea that project implementers and host institution partners should engage in informal conversations at both the institutional and national levels. As the context shifts, conversations may evolve over time. These 'conversations that matter':

- build trusting relationships,
- identify priorities relevant to the local context, and
- provide locally adapted mechanisms for AET transformation.

Contracting relationships: Project implementation was frequently challenged by contractual relationships. Contracts limiting programmatic flexibility were seen as problematic. In addition, the issue of ownership was frequently raised. If beneficiary independence is part of achieving food security, as suggested by USAID Forward and Local Solutions, innovation in development contract design may be required. It appears that contract officers should be brought into these conversations.



Furthermore, the systemic capacity of host institutions to manage USAID contracts influences effective programmatic opportunities for agricultural development, yet projects are not financed to address these issues. Three dimensions were identified:

- poor institutional accounting capacity;
- project partner risk and control issues, and
- lack of project flexibility to adapt to opportunities and failures.

There was considerable support for developing local accounting capacity and a learning-by-doing model. Fixed obligation grants, however, were not seen as appropriate for the adaptive management and coaching needed for institutional development.

Project Implementation: Ensuring successful programmatic implementation was a major priority for participants. It focused on two features: organizational form and change processes. Organizational forms structure project relationships influencing communication and coordination. Open lines of project communication should be assured across the target AET organization, and with other related institutions. These lines of communication involve:

- face-to-face relationships (trust building);
- conversations that matter (mindset change); and
- shared governance (ownership).

Workshop participants preferred an implementation process which featured a phased portfolio approach using small experiments/interventions with frequent feedback and flexibility in adaptation to opportunities and failures.

Experiential Learning: Perhaps no other theme had such heartfelt support as experiential learning. It is at the core of real AET institutional transformation. The entrepreneurial culture is based in critical thinking and problem solving skills for innovation. But it is not just subject matter that needs changing. Experiential learning is a systemic issue addressing the mindset of institutional transformation itself, involving both the curriculum and pedagogy that supports it.

Three aspects were indicated. Experiential learning:

- is a holistic, multidimensional concept;
- requires teacher professional development; and
- should be part of all organizational conversations.

Telling the story

Agricultural education and training is fundamental to sustained improvements in a country's food security. However, the link is rarely immediate and will be locally nuanced. Institutionally linked transformations in curriculum, pedagogy, teacher professional education and administrative systems can generate highly qualified and motivated agricultural professionals and entrepreneurs on a sustained basis. As these agricultural professionals become a critical mass in a country's agricultural value chains, production and incomes will improve leading to nutritional security. The pathway to that goal can be indicated through graduate tracer studies and employer surveys to demonstrate placement of improved human capital in agricultural value chains.

The conversations were not conclusive, but the following pathway could be re-constructed from items of conversation consensus. Institutional improvements come through seriously confronting challenges together (from multiple stakeholder perspectives), determining political will and systemic capacity through informal conversations, and then collectively implementing small experiments that when successful can be scaled up to change institutional practices.