



CIRAD-INRA Joint Consultative Committee on Ethics in Agricultural Research

MULTIPLE PARTNERSHIPS FOR RESEARCH

Abstract

Partnerships play a major part in research operations at both INRA and CIRAD, for scientific, technical, institutional, financial and social reasons. At both of these targeted research organizations, research operations are intended to respond to problems caused by the practices of a range of socioeconomic players. As a result, partnerships are an intrinsic value and contribute to the generation of knowledge and the development of solutions to scientific questions raised by societal issues, as well as prompting new research projects. INRA and CIRAD are used to building partnerships. However, in recent years, the number of partners in their various projects has grown considerably, and their status, geographical origin and resources often vary considerably.

The INRA Ethics Committee (COMEPRA) issued a statement on the question of partnerships in 2001 and in 2004, the corresponding CIRAD committee issued a statement on the conditions for intervention in rural societies in developing countries. The changing context, particularly as a result of globalization and increasingly complex research issues, has since necessitated a rethink. Suggesting a joint debate between two organizations that view partnerships in different ways could have posed problems for the Ethics Committee. However, those problems have been lessened by the shift in recent years towards multiple partnerships, which has opened the way for an analysis and recommendations that tally with the specific contexts of the two organizations yet are also more general. The Committee notes that being a partner means working with someone else to produce more than one could have produced alone, while recognizing that competitiveness and competition both exist within the world of research.

The Committee considers that its job is not to “talk ethics”; but to foster a spirit of ethics by providing pointers. The statement therefore suggests thinking about the intellectual attitude required on the part of management at the two organizations, but also on that of the researchers who commit their organizations to partnerships and participate in their implementation. The Committee feels that an ethical approach to partnerships could gain from a mode of reflection that centres on debate between free, equal partners and sheds light on the premisses of the activities that each partner is planning. An ethical approach to a given debate is one that is independent of the specific characteristics of the organization adopting such an approach, but also of the specificities of the partners with whom it is working.

Bringing together people from different fields, jobs and organizations and a range of cultures under the umbrella of a partnership can also raise questions about the epistemic status of knowledge. Moreover, various sources of tension, some of which will not necessarily have been elucidated when drafting the partnership agreement, can arise, including:

- values: disagreements on values are both crucial and difficult to identify; initial exchanges between partners should serve to avoid the pitfalls of cultural specificities and different values;
- finalities: these relate to a long-term vision and are determined by values; talks about finalities are inevitable;
- the objectives of partnerships: these relate to a rationally, strategically determined medium term, and disagreements can be both real and substantial;

- the balance of the partnership and equality of partners, particularly as regards what each partners brings to the partnership, sharing of research results and their economic consequences, changes in research potential and researcher training, and governance;
- prospective responsibility: the aim here is to look at the medium- and long-term impact of technological development on future generations and the environment;
- conflicts and contradictions of interest: these may affect public confidence in the ability of organizations to fulfil their mandates, conduct their operations and fulfil their ethical responsibilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The general aim of these recommendations is to shed light on and facilitate the work of those who build and sustain partnerships in the field, and to support research teams in their commitment to ethical partnerships. By encouraging both organizations to expand their reflection on the values and principles that guide them with regard to partnership operations, this approach should provide research stakeholders (both internal and external) with pointers to help them address the issues that arise during their daily work. These recommendations are not in any way a value judgement of current practices at the two organizations. More precisely, allowing for the range of roles and responsibilities of each and every player within the organizations, the Committee recommends:

THAT THE BOARDS OF TRUSTEES AND GENERAL MANAGEMENT OF THE ORGANIZATIONS

1. Favour the general interest, as regards both partnership relations and public stances, and the production of public goods ("commons").
2. Expand the move to reflect on the values and principles of their organization, clearly set out their fundamental ethical choices, and make those choices known within their organization and to their partners.
3. Establish and publish a code for responsible conduct of research.
4. Organize internal transparency as regards partnerships, clarify the levels on which partnerships should be negotiated and decisions made, and set out the criteria for choosing partners.
5. Develop tools for research staff (methods/grids for analysing the risks and opportunities), notably drawing on past experience.
6. Assess their organization's partnerships and responsibility as regards to the quality of the results obtained, of its relations with its partners, and the impact of its research.

THAT PARTNERSHIP NEGOTIATORS AND DECISION-MAKERS, RESEARCHERS AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

7. Address ethical issues before negotiating and signing partnerships, including the dissemination and use of research results.
8. Assess the risks and opportunities of planned partnerships.
9. Introduce governance methods that satisfy the ethical demands of partnerships.

THAT OTHER STAKEHOLDERS IN PARTNERSHIPS

10. Commit to remaining vigilant and raising the alarm if necessary, which means that organizations have to define the information channels to be used and protect the researchers using those channels.
11. Ensure the quality of results and reporting.
12. Respect professional charters and codes, and the rules applied by the organizations.