

I am going to tell you a little about Trellis Fund, how it came to be, and how it evolved.

At their core, the Innovation Labs connect researchers in the global north to researchers and implementers in the global south so they can put their heads together and tackle problems faced by farmers in the global south. It's a neat model that creates synergies around the specific problems defined by a given project, but also enduring north-south relationships among researchers and practitioners.

In the early days of the Horticulture Innovation Lab, we weren't yet including small organizations and we were actively looking for ways to get students involved. Coming from the Peace Corps, I had a lot of great experiences with grassroots organizations who really understood the problems faced by smallholders, and yet these local organizations are sometimes excluded from mainstream development because of economies of scale and they frequently lack the basic operating costs, like gas money, to reach the farmers they serve.

While I was a student at Davis, I met a lot of amazing grad students who had farming backgrounds and were acquiring formidable technical skills, and they were so eager to put their new skills to use, rather than just applying them to course work and research papers.

So the Trellis Fund was just a logical extension of the Innovation Lab model to include these smaller actors, and while our overall goals are the same, Trellis aims to tap the great potential of local organizations and passionate grad students.

For the small organizations, that potential is associated with their close connection to the smallholder farmers. These grassroots organizations represent, advocate for and organize their communities, they know the on-the-ground realities and the complexities of the problems that smallholders face.

This is a very important contribution because our notions of development are socially constructed and they are continuously negotiated and contested by various actors along the aid chain, and power over these normative struggles tends to cluster near the top. I imagine everyone in here has somewhat different notions of what it means for poor farmers in a small village to develop their livelihoods, and different beliefs about the roles of outside interventions, farmers associations, political organization, and the interface between new technologies and indigenous practices.

In creating Trellis, we wanted to empower the local organization's notions of development. It's the local organizations that create Trellis projects and define the type of outside expertise they'd like to draw upon. We wanted to narrow the socioeconomic gap between the project creator and the farmer, because we believed the local actors are more likely to understand the farmers and be more accountable to the farmers (rather than the almighty donors), because the leadership and staff at these grassroots organizations are more likely to inhabit the same communities and the same social networks as the farmers.

We also get a bigger bang for our buck with smaller organizations, because they are closer to the communities and they can efficiently reach the target communities. It's amazing to see what they can do with \$2,000 to \$4,000 dollars. When you talk to someone with the green ID, ask them about their work.

Besides the small organizations, we also wanted Trellis to serve as a mechanism to lure more grad students into international development. Trellis was our way of recruiting (or stealing) talented students who didn't yet know about how thrilling, and perplexing development can be.

We work in a field with many unanswered questions. And that opens up space for creative thinking and rapid changes and so, we thought, that for many students, once they are exposed to our strange world, via mechanisms like Trellis, we'll have our hooks in them.

We've all seen organizations stricken by founder's syndrome. I think the best thing we did once Trellis got going, was leave. Because new students came in to manage the Trellis Fund and they were better able to recognize the deficiencies in our original model and bring in new ideas and improve Trellis each year.

A few brief examples:

In the original model, we funded the local organizations with \$2,000 dollars for a horticultural project and provided the grad students with a small amount of money for 75 hours of their time which they would use to support the project, and we really encouraged the students to use that money to visit their partner organizations, meet the farmers, go to their fields, and get a better understanding of how they can contribute technical support to the project and build the capacity of the local organizations. But, we were surprised when only a few students actually went. So in the first big change to Trellis, we increased the students' budget and required them to visit their partner organization.

Many other aspects have evolved too. In the first iteration, we sent out the call for proposals to small organizations and the call for application to students at the same time. We selected the best project proposals and then we matched the students who best suited those projects. But that meant the students were applying to a very generalized opportunity to work with a-yet-to-be identified organization.

Now, the Trellis team selects the best project proposals in advance, and the local organizations include in their proposals, a student job description. The Trellis team sends out these job descriptions in their call for applications to the graduate students, enabling the students to apply to specific projects. This improved Trellis' ability to recruit students, because it's more compelling for a prospective Trellis student to apply to a specific project that they know aligns with their interests and burgeoning expertise.

The training for the students has also become more sophisticated. In the beginning, we did a little training on extension practices and cross-cultural communication, patted them on the back and sent them on their way. This has expanded into a 10-week seminar for the graduate students that coaches them in a variety of topics, such as participatory approaches, gender sensitive training, and the development of extension materials.

Trellis has also made a number of other changes, increasing the awards to the small organizations from \$2,000 to \$4,000 dollars and recruiting graduate students from more universities.

The Trellis team has experimented with supplemental fellowships, so the students and organizations can acquire additional funds for project materials or even attend trainings, like the Postharvest Short Course.

And this is the neatest part about the way the students at the Horticulture Innovation Lab have managed the Trellis Fund. They have applied an experimental and exploratory zeal to Trellis. They are constantly seeking ways to improve and refine the program. And it's been so much fun to watch it evolve and grow over the years.

Up next, the current Trellis Fund manager, Lauren Howe, will discuss some of Trellis' achievements.