What are innovation platforms?

Innovation platforms are ways to bring together different stakeholders to identify solutions to common problems or to achieve common goals. They ensure that different interests are taken into account, and various groups contribute to finding solutions. Used by the private sector to gather information and improve networking among key stakeholders in a particular economic sector, they caught the attention of development agencies at the end of the 1980s. They are now increasingly common in research and development initiatives.

But innovation platforms can be difficult and time-consuming, so must be used with care. This brief explains what innovation platforms are and how they work, and it describes some of their advantages and limitations. It is one of a series of briefs on innovation platforms; the other briefs in the series go into detail on specific aspects of the approach.

Spaces for learning and change

An innovation platform is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, agricultural input suppliers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to develop a common vision and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a group or coordinate activities by individual members. Individual members can also innovate alone, spurred by the coordinated group activities.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Innovation platforms may tackle challenges and opportunities at various levels: in a village or community, in a district or nationwide, or throughout a value chain or economic sector. They may work at a single level, or across several levels.

Innovation platforms are particularly useful in agriculture because agricultural issues tend to be complex. They involve different biophysical, socioeconomic and political factors, and concern various formal and informal institutions. By bringing together stakeholders

in various sectors and from different levels, innovation platforms may be able to identify and address common concerns more effectively.

Innovation platforms can be used to explore strategies that can boost productivity, manage natural resources, improve value chains, and adapt to climate change. Some innovation platforms focus on single issues; others deal with multiple topics.

Who uses innovation platforms?

Various types of organizations use innovation platforms:

- Agricultural research organizations use innovation platforms to help make their research more relevant and to facilitate the adaptation and dissemination of findings. They force researchers to look beyond their own disciplinary or commodity boundaries and consider the whole picture (see Brief 3).
- Development agencies and NGOs find them useful to identify areas for interventions, to ensure that the interventions are appropriate for particular situations, and to enable stakeholders to influence policy making and development activities (Brief 12).
- Local and national governments use them to improve policy making, links with clients, and their outreach services for citizens (Brief 2).
- Donors regard innovation platforms as a way to improve the targeting and effectiveness of development interventions. While they may sponsor innovation platforms, they are not normally members themselves.

Some stakeholders are crucial members of innovation platforms:

- Farmers and other rural people use innovation groups to express their interests and guide activities that are intended to benefit them.
- The private sector, including traders, input suppliers, service providers, processors, wholesalers and retailers, can benefit from innovation platforms that aim to boost economic activities and make value chains more profitable.

Examples of innovation platforms

The Consortium for Sustainable Development of the Andean Ecoregion (www.condesan.org) uses innovation platforms to address issues in natural resource management. They engage local actors to discuss how to share benefits and resolve conflicts.

In the Fodder Adoption Project, the International Livestock Research Institute (fodderadoption.wordpress.com/) used innovation platforms in Ethiopia to improve livestock feeding. Through platform discussions, the project's initial narrow focus on feed broadened to include the procurement of improved crossbred cows, new milk transportation arrangements, and the establishment of a dairy cooperative.

Innovation platforms are also used in several other projects notably the Nile Basin Development Challenge (http://nilebdc.org), and the imGoats (http://imgoats.org) and PROGEBE (http://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/27871) projects.

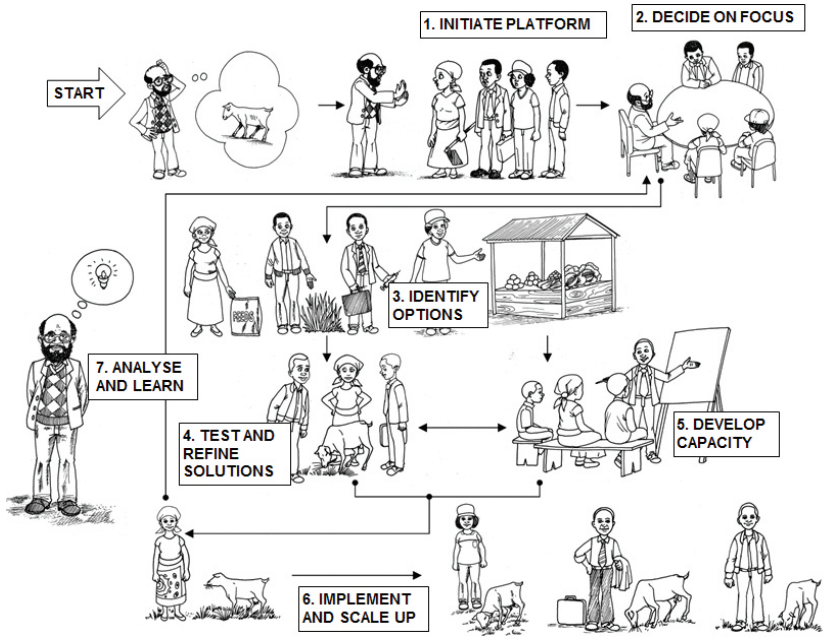
In southern Africa, the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (www.icrisat.org) used innovation platforms to improve the production and marketing of goats. Innovation platforms helped lower transaction costs in the value chain, meant that farmers could make a bigger profit, and ensured that the market could guide investment in goat production.

The Convergence of Science–Strengthening Innovation Systems program (www.cos-sis.org) used innovation platforms in West Africa to improve smallholder agriculture. The platforms studied bottlenecks in production systems and induced institutional changes in value chains and policymaking.

The International Center for Tropical Agriculture and its partners (www.alianzasdeaprendizaje.org) developed a regional 'learning alliance' in Central America to improve market access for farmers through collaborative innovation.

The Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (www.fara-africa.org) promotes the use of innovation platforms in integrated agricultural research for development programs that target productivity, markets, natural resource management and policy issues.

More: : ilri.org/taxonomy/term/58



Innovation platforms tend to follow a seven-step cycle

How innovation platforms work

Innovation platforms generally follow several steps.

- Initiate. Any stakeholder group can initiate innovation platforms, but it is usually a research or development organization, a government agency or an NGO that does so. This organization identifies the broad focus area of the innovation platform, identifies the various stakeholders, brings them together, and convenes the first few meetings. It identifies someone to facilitate the innovation platform: perhaps one of its own staff, or someone else from outside (Brief 10).

- Decide on focus. The platform members discuss the focus area and identify bottlenecks, problems and opportunities. They may refine the focus further, expand it, or shift it to a different set of issues. They gather information from various sources, including research findings, current practices, local knowledge and policy guidelines (Brief 7).

- Identify options. The platform members decide what they want to do to solve the problems or take advantage of the opportunities that they have identified. The range of options may be wide. For example, they may decide to test new varieties of a crop, explore ways to improve supplies of inputs, promote the marketing of a product, or press for a change in government policy (Briefs 3 and 6).

- Test and refine solutions. Solutions must be tested and adapted to make sure they work. Farmers may test new farming methods; traders may try offering more for higher grades of produce; an input supplier may market-test a new type of product. The innovation may be a new technology (a new type of seed or farming technique), or an institutional change (a policy adjustment or a new way to manage marketing). The innovation platform coordinates these experiments and monitors whether they are successful (Briefs 3 and 5).

- Develop capacity. In most cases, it is necessary to develop the capacity of different actors in order for the solutions to succeed. Farmers may need training in a new technique; cooperatives may need help with organization and bookkeeping; new ways may be needed to multiply and distribute seed or to manage the marketing of produce. The innovation platform identifies these needs and finds ways to develop the capacity required (Brief 8).

- Implement and scale up. If the innovation is successful, the innovation platform works with its member groups to get it adopted widely. That may mean documenting and publicizing the innovation, arranging training and study visits, persuading other groups to adopt it etc. (Briefs 7 and 9).

- Analyse and learn. Learning what has succeeded and what has not is an important part of innovation platforms, especially those with a research focus. This information is fed back to platform members so they can identify further changes to be made (Briefs 3, 5, 8, 10 and 12).

Different words, same idea

- Concentration and innovation group
- Innovation network
- Innovation coalition
- Innovation configuration
- Multi-stakeholder platform
- Association interprofessionnelle (French)
- Plataforma de inovação (Portuguese)

Dynamic processes

Innovation platforms are a systematic attempt to facilitate change through joint action. While they are structured, they are also flexible, changing in response to the current situation.

Changing focus. As problems are solved and new issues emerge, the activities and focus of an innovation platform may change over time. It is the platform members who decide.

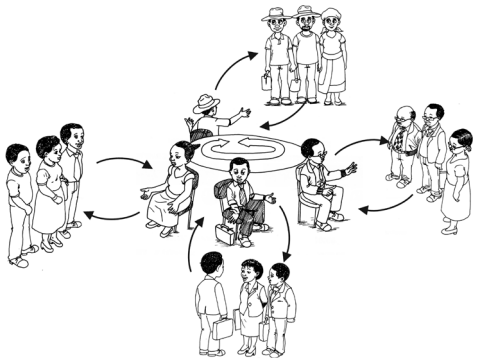
Changing membership. The membership of an innovation platform may change over time as needs arise. The platform may invite new members to join: for example, a platform focusing on agriculture may invite someone with expertise in water to join if this emerges as a key issue in farm production. A platform could bring in outsiders on a short-term or one-off basis to provide information or advice.

Changing responsibilities. The management of the innovation platform may shift over time from the initiating organization to one or more of the members. For example, a farmer organization or government agency may take over responsibility for coordinating the platform.

Temporary or permanent? Innovation platforms may be temporary: they exist only as long as necessary to solve a problem. Or they may be extended as new issues and opportunities emerge. If so, it is necessary to find ways to fund the platform and its activities after initial project funding ends.

Links to other bodies. The members of an innovation platform provide vital links to the organizations or groups they represent. Each member represents his or her organization, and is expected to communicate the platform's suggestions and activities back to his or her peers.

Linking innovation platforms. Some problems cannot be addressed at one level: a district-level platform may identify a policy that needs to be changed at a national level. It may be useful to form innovation platforms at several levels (community, district, national) to address problems at each one. Innovation platforms at each level should be linked to feed ideas and information up, down and sideways (Brief 9).



Innovation platform actors and stakeholders

Benefits of innovation platforms

Strengths of innovation platforms include:

- They facilitate dialogue and understanding among stakeholders and provide a space for them to create a common vision and mutual trust. They offer a neutral space to air disagreements and conflicts, and for members to state their needs and requirements (Brief 4).
- They enable partners to identify the bottlenecks hindering innovation, and develop solutions beyond what individual actors can achieve alone, for example, in infrastructure, institutional change and policy development (Brief 2).
- They create motivation and a feeling of ownership of the solutions that they develop: People readily buy into solutions they have been involved in developing.
- They facilitate upward communication. They enable weaker actors (such as small-scale farmers) to express their views on an equal basis

with powerful actors (such as processors or the government). They empower communities to demand and negotiate for services from the government and support organizations.

- They lead to better-informed decisions. Innovation platforms enable joint learning and cooperation among diverse actors to solve problems and reduce uncertainties. Farmers can learn how to sell their products; policymakers gain evidence to use in creating a more enabling environment where innovations can happen.

- They contribute to capacity development. By improving communication, learning and exposure to new people and ideas, innovation platforms help members to clarify their roles, organize themselves, and adapt to unforeseen changes and new opportunities (Briefs 7 and 8).

- They make innovative research possible. Innovation platforms create opportunities for research to be demand-driven, to find critical issues for investigation, and to disseminate research outputs. Platform members are involved in the research process, and are more likely to be convinced by the findings (Brief 3).

- They enhance impact. Farmers can improve their agricultural productivity and profitability and improve how they manage natural resources. Value chain actors can engage more effectively in the market. Policy making can be more participatory and appropriate for solving issues on the ground (Brief 12).

Related approaches

- Public–private partnerships. These may focus on developing technologies such as hybrid maize and biotech together with industry. But they may neglect stakeholders such as farmers and government.
- Participatory research. This is useful to adapt technologies to farm conditions. But it may fail to consider outside constraints, such as issues or bottlenecks in the value chain.
- Learning alliances. These enable groups of farmers or traders to work together and learn from each other. But they rarely bring in other perspectives.

Constraints

Innovation platforms are not the solution to all problems. Because they are not rigid or predictable, they can lead a research or development program in unexpected directions (which may be a good thing, but can be hard to justify to senior managers and donors).

Depending on the circumstances, other approaches, such as more traditional research coordination meetings, stakeholder consultations, or participatory research methods, may be more appropriate. All these methods can be used in conjunction with innovation platforms.

- Progress and success depends on the full buy-in of the members. Members have to be willing to work together and trust each other. Social and institutional conflicts, lack of political will, and power structures can hinder the growth of the innovation platform (Brief 4).

- Innovation platforms can be difficult and costly to implement. They require a range of facilitation and research expertise—which may not be available. The costs of fostering partnerships should be seen as an investment—requiring a long-term perspective (Brief 10).

- They require a long-term perspective: engaging actors and developing relationships takes time. Necessary investments in infrastructure and policies are often long-term. Achieving visible outputs may take longer than a project allows.

- It can be difficult to monitor and evaluate innovation platforms in a systematic way. Their outcomes depend on many factors, and many other factors may intervene to reinforce or mask their effects (Brief 5).

- Shortcuts are risky. Developing and promoting innovation requires systems thinking, including technical as well as institutional innovations and policy adaptations. There is a danger of regarding innovation platforms merely as forums to transfer and disseminate technology.

- Tangible outputs are needed to sustain the members' interest and commitment to the innovation process. Without them, they may lose interest.

Sustainability

How to ensure sustainability of the process? Often the platform itself does not have to be sustainable!

Once capacity for innovation (Brief 8) is established in a system, the platform itself may not be required.

It may be useful for certain types of platforms, such as higher-level policy-oriented platforms, or those that facilitate information exchange, to be sustained over time. Funding and support for such platforms needs to be found.

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Credits

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CGIAR RESEARCH PROGRAM ON Integrated Systems for the Humid Tropics

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November 2013

Innovation platforms to shape national policy

You are the head of your country's Department of Livestock, and the Prime Minister has tasked you with setting up a new policy to develop your country's dairy production. Where do you start?

Your veterinarians emphasize animal health issues; your livestock experts recommend optimal industrial feed formulas; engineers promote automated milking units; the economists argue that the sector is unprofitable anyway so it is best to import milk powder. But what do all your experts know about the real-life challenges of dairy development? Don't you wish you could ask for all this advice from just one source that gathers together all of the sector's experience and its vested interests?

An innovation platform can do just that. In the messy and power-infused world of policymaking, innovation platforms can help balance the vested interests of market actors, civil society and other stakeholders to support policy processes. They can bring together different types of expertise, experience and interests. They can facilitate learning between policymakers and market and civil society actors to develop negotiated and implementable policies and regulations.

Engaging with policymakers

Policymaking aims to create an enabling environment of regulations, incentives and sanctions to structure a society and its markets. It inevitably means finding compromises among different stakeholder groups that are likely to be affected by the policy. Innovation platforms can facilitate interactions between the government, the private sector, civil society and other policy stakeholders to enhance effective policy development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

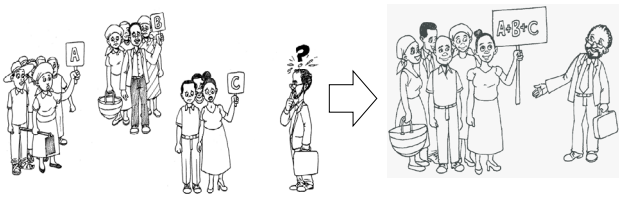
Policy processes are formal and informal negotiations in which heterogeneous groups of stakeholders seek to influence policy agenda setting and the development and implementation of policy (Schut et al. 2013).

Market actors

All the people involved in the production, marketing, processing, and consumption of a particular commodity. For example, in the vegetable sector, they include input suppliers, market gardeners, canned-food processors, fresh-produce wholesalers and retailers, and consumers.

Civil society actors

Individuals and organizations that influence the policy process by representing the values and concerns of citizens. For example, environmental organizations, animal-rights organizations, labour unions, and women's rights organizations.



Innovation platforms help stakeholders agree policy suggestions—making it more likely that they are realistic and will be adopted

By bringing together the expertise, experience and interests of different members, innovation platforms can provide a valuable contribution to the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies. Such joint policymaking processes can enable rapid adoption of policies or widespread implementation of new policies.

However, different stakeholder groups usually have different—often conflicting—interests. So harmony does not always prevail. Some actors have more power and influence than others. Some stakeholders may be strategically excluded from, or unwilling to participate in, the platform. That makes it crucial to facilitate constructive multi-stakeholder debate and to address power asymmetries.

Setting sector standards

Innovation platforms can support the development and harmonization of national policies by setting agreed standards for a sector. Such standards can define the quality of products being traded on national and international markets, so reinforcing the confidence of consumers in the products.

Sectoral standards can also cover aspects of food quality and safety to facilitate trade with other countries. In Nepal, for example, the Poultry Entrepreneurs Forum helped the government draft a quarantine law in response to avian influenza. Such standards are often linked to accreditation and certification schemes jointly developed by market actors and later made mandatory by regulators.

With concern increasingly expressed in international value chains about social responsibility, national innovation platforms could help devise baseline employment and social standards for employees. In Mozambique, for example, the inter-ministerial biofuels platform has set standards to measure the financial sustainability of biofuel producers, thus strengthening the overall sustainability of the sector. The standards may also promote environmental sustainability—as described in Case 1.

Case 1. National innovation platforms support policy development

In Mozambique, an inter-ministerial innovation platform collaborated with civil society and the private sector to discuss sustainable agro-industrial biofuel production. It balanced the interests and needs of different ministries, the private sector and civil society. It resulted in a policy to create opportunities for biofuel producers and rural population; it also helped the government reach its biofuel objectives. More information: Schut et al. (2013).

Under the sub-Saharan Challenge Program of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa, innovation platforms in southwest Uganda identified various policy areas needing intervention. These include the management of free-range livestock and the enforcement of contractual agreements. The platforms launched several policy innovations in collaboration with local policymakers resulting in community-level awareness-raising and educational activities on the formulation and enforcement of bylaws. Capacity building covered natural resources and free-range livestock management, structures for resolving community conflict, and incentive systems for complying with bylaws.

More: Wanjiku Chiuri (CIAT), w.chiuri@cgiar.org

Groups of stakeholders discuss a draft sustainability framework at a consultation workshop in Maputo, May 2010 (photo credit: Wageningen UR/ Marc Schut)

Facilitating policy implementation

National innovation platforms can make an important contribution to the implementation of policies. This is particularly relevant in countries where public authorities have few resources to enforce their decisions. It can be more efficient to delegate implementation to a body that already encompasses major actors in a given sector.

For example, in Mali, the Federation of Livestock and Meat Interprofessional Group collects, analyses and disseminates market information for its district-level members. The South African Meat Industry Company helps enforce marketing regulations by supervising the enforcement of sectorial standards. Both have a key role in developing the capacity of their members to respond to regulatory, market and environmental pressures (Brief 8).

Case 2. Innovation platforms inform policy-making and help implement policies in Ghana

The Convergence of Sciences—Strengthening Innovation Systems program collaborates with policymakers in platforms that have a direct influence on policy formulation and implementation. One such platform in the cocoa sector in Ghana enhanced communication on market prices and facilitated input supplies to farmers, improving market transparency. A second innovation platform, focusing on oilpalm, went further by formulating and enforcing bylaws to ban the burning of tyres as fuel in oil processing (Nederlof and Pyburn 2012).

Many national innovation platforms, such as the Horticultural Promotion Council of Zimbabwe, implement specific training and research-and-development activities involving field trials. Innovation platforms can also help enforce policies (Case 2).

Creating national platforms

Bringing together the different interests of market and civil society actors into one platform is highly complex and raises questions around power structures (Brief 4).

Several models of national innovation platforms have been tried across different country contexts with mixed results (Shepherd et al. 2009). They vary in their actor composition, the relative power of farmers vs. other stakeholders, and the level of active involvement of public officials and researchers. 'Interprofessional organizations' representing sectorial concerns in French-speaking Africa are efficient in lobbying government for tailored legislation, but their sub-organization in separate 'professional colleges' and consensus decisionmaking encumber their processes. Value-chain roundtables set up by governments are more straightforward, but their composition is not as open because they comprise actors who have been invited to the table. They may also fail to represent smaller or poorer market and civil society actors that are not based in the capital city where meetings are usually held.

Case 3. Involving all market actors in statutory decision-making

In South Africa, members of the Red Meat Industry Forum represent all actors of the sector, including labourers and consumers. Rather than using a simple majority in decision-making, the forum uses a double two-thirds majority vote representing both members and total sector production. Decisions with the double two-thirds majority are thus endorsed by a majority of members (with strong smallholder representation) and by members representing two-thirds of the sector's production (which are the larger agribusinesses). These forum-endorsed decisions are submitted to the National Agricultural Marketing Council to become a new regulation (Cadilhon 2011).

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November 2013

Research and innovation platforms

Innovation platforms are advocated as a promising way to find solutions to complex problems, such as those in agriculture and natural resource management. As social, economic and environmental problems grow ever more complex, researchers need to engage more actively with stakeholders such as farmers, development practitioners and policymakers to explore, design and implement solutions (Schut et al. 2011; Calow et al. 2013). Innovation platforms offer them an opportunity to do so.

Researchers are not necessarily part of innovation platforms. Platforms can work well without any research inputs, or with only peripheral involvement by researchers. But in recent years, interest in how innovation platforms can benefit, and benefit from, research has increased considerably.

The traditional approach to research assumes that experts (i.e. researchers) generate knowledge, which farmers and others adopt, resulting in change. In reality, such a linear approach often has a limited impact: the research turns out to be inappropriate, and the findings are not used. In response, much research has shifted towards more collaborative and reflexive mode, with a lot more collaboration between researchers and other stakeholders.

Definitions

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Action research engages potential research users (e.g. policymakers, planners and implementers) in a process of 'learning by doing'. Practical solutions to problems are developed as part of the research process. In contrast to traditional research, action research is linked to implementation and has an explicit agenda for change. It is often seen as a cycle in which a team of researchers and stakeholders jointly identify desired outcomes, diagnose problems, pilot approaches, evaluate their impact, and propose improvements and get back to the cycle (Tucker 2008).

This brief discusses two questions:

- How can research contribute to innovation platforms?
- How can innovation platforms support research?

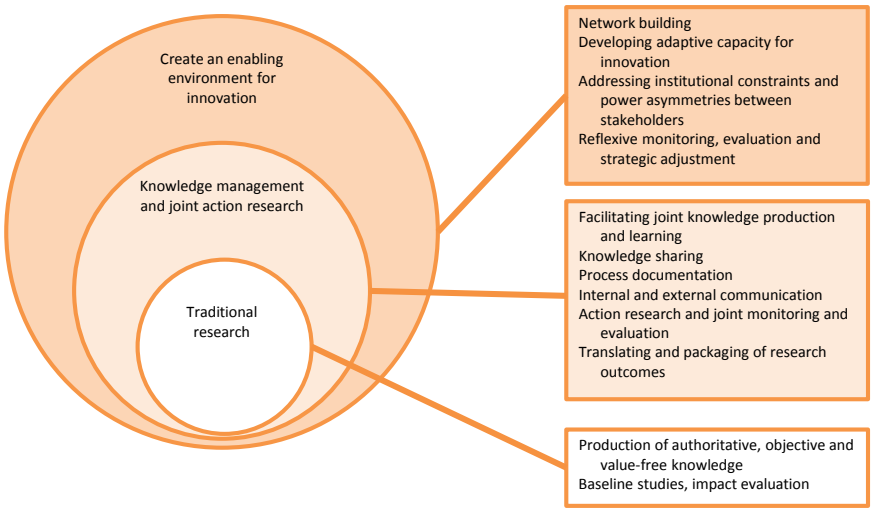

Figure 1: Three ways that research can contribute to innovation platforms

Research supports innovation platforms

Research and researchers contribute to platforms in at least three ways (Figure 1). The categories are not mutually exclusive, but are embedded in one another.

Traditional research

Traditional research aims to produce authoritative, objective and value-free knowledge and technologies. It is up to farmers, policymakers and other potential beneficiaries to put these into use. The innovation platform can call on researchers to do specific pieces of research, develop technologies or plug gaps in knowledge. Researchers can also conduct baseline studies and evaluate the impact of an innovation platform (Case 1 and Brief 5).

Case 1. A research-supported platform

A government-initiated, inter-ministerial innovation platform in Mozambique collaborated with civil society and private sector actors to develop a policy for sustainable biofuels. Between 2008 and 2012, researchers from Wageningen University supported the platform by making an inventory of biofuel activities in the country (traditional research), facilitating and documenting platform meetings (knowledge management) and fundraising and lobbying to create an enabling environment for collaboration. Supporting different stakeholder groups throughout the policy process was challenging, as stakeholders had conflicting needs and interests.

More: Schut et al. (2011).

Knowledge management and action research

Knowledge management makes research more accessible and interprets it so people can understand and use it. There are many ways to do this: identifying shared objectives, producing knowledge jointly, learning together, documenting innovation processes and best practices and communicating results.

Platform members can be involved in action research. They can help design and implement research, and can monitor and evaluate the platform's work. Researchers may take the lead in such research, or play more coordinating and backstopping roles. They can also train and develop the capacity of the platform members to carry out research (Brief 8).

Enabling environments for innovation

Innovation is largely enabled or constrained by institutional factors (such as rules and policies) and political factors (such as conflict among stakeholders). Researchers can support platform members in securing funds or gaining the ear of policymakers. They can also build the capacity of members to address power dynamics in the platform. Such functions may be critical to the outcome of platform activities.

Innovation platforms support research

Platforms enable researchers to engage with potential research users (such as policymakers and farmers), providing research with a solid base and making it more likely that findings get used. Engaging stakeholders in research can help identify research questions and desired outcomes, and can improve data collection and analysis (Case 2).

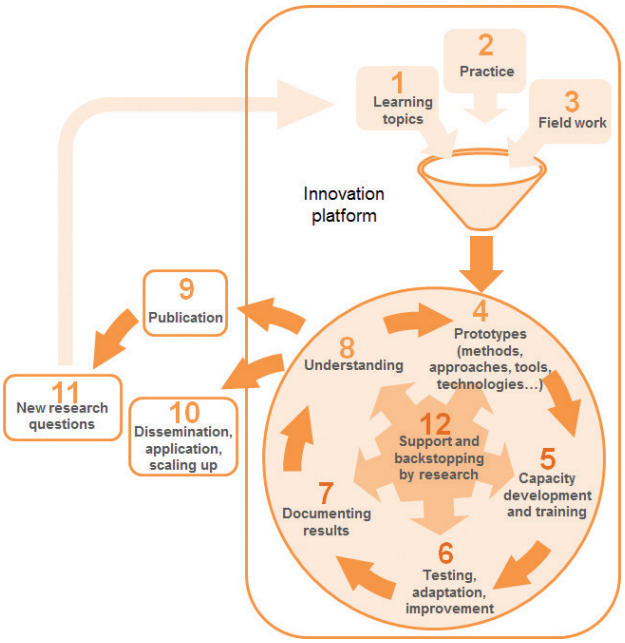

Figure 2: The research process in innovation platforms

Case 2. A research-initiated platform

The Nile Basin Development Challenge uses innovation platforms in a 3-year (2011–13) project to improve rainwater management in Ethiopia. Researchers play multiple roles: establishing the platforms, facilitating and managing them, obtaining funding for pilot interventions, building the capacity of members, and process documentation. Because innovation platforms were new to their members, building trust took time. The power dynamics and representation of stakeholders were also a challenge: it was necessary to get the right balance to prevent powerful individuals from hijacking the research agenda.

More: http://nilebdc.org/

Innovation platforms can support various stages in the research process (Figure 2).

- The process starts when members jointly identify topics they wish to learn about (1), Ideas may come from community knowledge, practitioners (2) and previous findings (3).
- Platform members discuss prototypes (the methods, approaches, tools or technologies) that may address issues at stake (4).
- It may be necessary to offer training and develop capacity to test the prototypes (5).
- Members agree on a timetable and procedures, and allocate roles and responsibilities to test the prototype (6). These may build on or align with existing collaborations among stakeholders. Testing may be supported by research, or by outside specialists. It may result in further adaptations and improvements.
- The process is documented so stakeholders can learn and experiences can be shared (7).
- Results can then be analysed (8), published (9) and disseminated (10).
- It can also lead to new questions for the platform or traditional research (11).
- Throughout, research provides support and back up to platform activities (12).

Benefits

Research and innovation platforms contribute to one another. Research strengthens innovation platforms: their work is better informed, more systematic and more credible. Platforms can also strengthen research so it is more applied, more realistic, more acceptable, and more likely to be adopted.

Instead of considering costs and risks of contributing to platforms, researchers might seek mutual benefits, so platforms help research fulfil its mission.

Researchers may take different roles in innovation platforms. They may play a coordination or facilitation role they may play a minor or supporting role. Roles may change over time. Some platforms are initiated by researchers and other stakeholders take them over. Some platforms are initiated by others and researchers are invited to join.

Risks

Innovation platforms are not without risks.

- **Dominance by research.** Compared to other platform members, researchers tend to be high-status, well-educated and articulate. They may inadvertently dominate platform activities.

- **Differing timetables.** Research tends to be driven by annual budgets, so researchers are pressed to get activities done on time. Innovation platforms tend to use more participatory approaches that may take more time.

- **Differing agendas.** Researchers may find that the platform's agenda conflicts with research aims. Experiments, for example, may lack scientific rigour or the platform may steer activities in an unpredictable direction, away from what researchers or funders regard as a priority. Research leaders may not allocate staff time and resources to activities they see as having a limited payoff.

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November 2013

Power dynamics and representation in innovation platforms

The farmers in Gebugesa village spent the whole day planting elephant grass seedlings on several hectares of grazing land. The next day, they came back and uprooted all the seedlings. Why?

They had been told to plant the seedlings by government extension agents who were members of an innovation platform in Ethiopia. Other members of the platform—officials from the Bureau of Agriculture—had to meet national government targets for soil and water conservation, so pressured the platform to mobilize farmers to plant the grass and enclose the area. The farmers agreed to plant the grass, but were afraid that the fencing would stop them grazing their animals and that poorer people would not be able to collect dung for fuel.

Although the innovation platform had several farmer members, they were overruled by more powerful government staff. The initial fodder interventions were abandoned and the platform had to relocate this work to another community.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Power dynamics is the relationship between individuals in a group who have different amounts of power.

Why are power and representation important?

Innovation platforms bring together less powerful people (such as farmers) with more influential actors (such as government or big traders). The combination of these different actors can be a catalyst to develop solutions to common problems or to achieve a common goal. If their interests are harnessed effectively, innovation platforms can be a powerful mechanism for change.

In theory, members of the platform are equal and have a chance to articulate their needs. Practice is often different. Unless this is recognized and dealt with, a platform can reinforce these inequalities.

Failure to resolve power and representation issues may seriously harm the functioning of an innovation platform. It can affect the priority given to issues, the selection of entry points, as well as the design and adoption of interventions. If some voices are ignored or if a group is not represented, they may disengage leading to inappropriate interventions that exacerbate rather than solve problems.

How do these issues emerge?

Innovation platforms often assume that members work together as equals, that they represent whole groups, that they can identify common challenges and opportunities, and that they can develop trust and capacities to work together on shared goals.

Power differences can negate these assumptions. Some community members are wealthier or more influential than others. Women farmers may have different priorities from men. Government officials may want to enforce rules rather than meet community needs. Traders may manipulate access to information and markets at the expense of farmers. Academics may promote new technologies but ignore local knowledge. Getting the 'right people' together does not automatically lead to an inclusive process or solutions.

Power relations matter because the interests of members may be in conflict. It can be difficult to find an agreement that works for everyone. Some members may lack information or are unable to challenge more powerful actors. As a result, their interests are not reflected in platform decisions. Where platform members are supposed to represent wider groups, the selection of these representatives is critical.

If they are not addressed…

Power can be expressed in various ways, some more obvious than others. The first step in addressing them is to identify them. Here are examples.

More powerful members may dominate. They may restrict others from expressing their views and thus get their agendas acted on. Interventions are likely to benefit the powerful, increasing their power and further marginalizing weaker members.

- Examples: Richer or more influential members may appropriate new infrastructure (water sources, sales pens) as their own. They may manipulate members by acting as middlemen between buyers and farmers. Or they may use their knowledge to exploit the ignorance of others. The organizers of a platform may predetermine what issues it should address or restrict the solutions that can be applied. Government officials may use the platform to promote existing policies and projects.

Group diversity is not reflected. Farmers differ in their livelihood, knowledge, priorities and needs. If the platform only has one farmer member, he or she may not properly reflect this diversity. This leaves some farmers without representation.

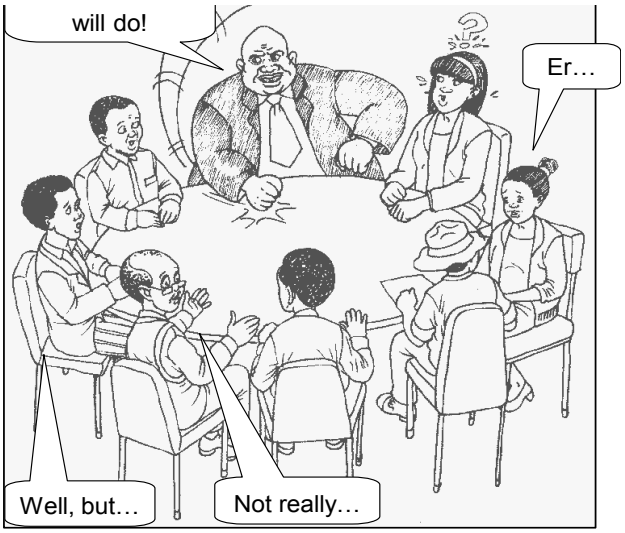
- Examples: A platform may focus on livestock issues even though most farmers do not own animals. It may promote high-value markets, excluding farmers who cannot fulfil the market criteria. Or it may encourage men to plant certain crops, making more work for women.

Not all knowledge is used. Differences in power can influence whose knowledge is shared.

- Examples: Scientists or experts may come to dominate platform discussions, reinforcing the view that scientific knowledge is superior to farmers' own knowledge.

Identifying power and representation issues

The local context should be thoroughly investigated before establishing a platform. A baseline analysis provides initial information, and makes it possible to assess the impact and equitability of interventions. Investigating the broader economic, political and cultural context may reveal reasons for power or status imbalances.



Skilful facilitation is needed to overcome difficult power relationships

Power dynamics and issues of representation vary from place to place, and the chances of changing these dynamics will also vary. Issues of power may be more problematic within politically sensitive or restrictive environments. Understanding this early on makes it possible to navigate potential barriers and manage expectations.

Stakeholder analysis is critical to identify key actors and their roles, and to understand who might represent different groups and help achieve platform objectives. It can also help identify who might create barriers and who might act as mediators. This helps ensure that the right people are included from the start. Stakeholder analysis also enables facilitators to understand the agendas of different actors.

It is important to monitor power relations after setting up a platform. Continuous observation and documentation of platform activities is important; it is important to look further than just any successes. The more difficult aspects of facilitating innovation platforms can teach valuable lessons.

Some questions to prompt reflection and analysis:

- Who is involved? Who is missing and why? How is membership decided and by whom?
- What are the interests of the various actors, and how do they conflict or converge?
- Whose problems or needs are prioritized? How is this decided, and by whom?
- How does control over resources (e.g. budgets) affect who influences decisions or actions?
- How do platform actions affect members? Who benefits, and who does not? Have the impacts on all stakeholders been considered?

Dealing with power and representation

Participatory rural appraisal can help identify and prioritize problems, obtain the opinions of all community members and give them insights into others' situations.

Participatory video is particularly useful for illiterate groups. They can take photos and shoot video of their problems and record their points of view. Showing the video to platform members can open their eyes to new issues. Videos can be shown to officials who have not visited the field.

Roleplaying in which platform members step into someone else's shoes helps them understand different points of view.

Skilled facilitators help mediate between the different interests of platform members so they reach consensus—or at least a compromise acceptable to all. This role can be hard for insiders (one of the platform members) who may be part of the power structure. Outside facilitators who are not part of local power relationships can be better. Facilitators may need to advocate on behalf of less powerful members or take on neutral roles (Brief 10).

Evidence from research on benefits can help members see the value of platform membership.

Subgroups can give extra focus on the needs of specific groups. They can give marginalized members more power or build their capacities, for example, by providing training in negotiation and leadership skills or by facilitating collective action. In Ethiopia, for example, innovation platforms on natural resource management recognized that local authorities did not know how to facilitate participatory planning and implementation. A subgroup was created to train them.

Overcoming power differences in Gebugesa

In the Gebugesa case described above, facilitators used a combination of participatory video and role plays to overcome power differences. They encouraged platform members to reflect on power issues, changing both their attitudes and practice. Government staff began listening to the concerns of farmers, who had initially struggled to make their voices heard. Platform members started using a more collaborative approach to design and implement activities. As a result, interventions were more tailored to the needs of farmers.

Using informal spaces is a good way to address power dynamics outside formal meetings. The best approach depends on the context. One facilitator may openly prompt platform members to consider power dynamics. Another may use practical engagement and active learning. Exchange visits between platforms can share lessons and experiences.

Links between different levels are often necessary for local level platforms to address higher level constraints (such as inappropriate policies). Seemingly powerful local actors may struggle to make their voices heard at a higher level. One approach is to establish a national level platform (Brief 9).

Bypassing the platform is sometimes necessary when decisions in platforms are likely to have negative impacts. This may also be a catalyst for action, and can result in positive change.

What to remember

Power is expressed in various ways, and power dynamics are often more complex than they appear. Marginalized actors, for example, can express their power through non-engagement or resistance, giving them more influence than is often assumed.

Platforms can help change power dynamics, but this can be complex and difficult. Support may be required over a longer time through capacity building. Even if a platform cannot solve these problems, it may make these issues more visible and help others act on them.

Innovation platforms are not neutral mechanisms. They aim to promote change but may have unanticipated negative effects—producing winners and losers.

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November 2013

Monitoring innovation platforms

Innovation platforms can be complex and challenging so effective monitoring is critical to ensure that they function effectively and achieve their intended purposes.

This brief describes what a monitoring system does, who is involved, how it works, and what to do with the findings.

Why monitor?

Monitoring aims to assess the functioning and effectiveness of innovation platforms to improve policy and practice, develop capacity and improve links among actors. The information it gathers can be used to improve the management of the platform and its activities, change policies, and promote larger scale changes. These changes occur at various scales—farm, community, market, watershed, policy, research, etc.—and with diverse actors. The monitoring system seeks to document and value these changes.

Key design principles for the monitoring include:

- Members of the platform should take part.
- Information should be gathered continuously and fed back quickly.
- The process is iterative, so builds and refines knowledge over time.
- It uses a range of methods.
- It is linked with formal impact assessments.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

A monitoring system is a collection of methods and tools to track and measure innovation activities, processes among partners, and the results of these processes. It involves clarifying the hoped-for changes, identifying what to track over time, identifying who designs, participates, and decides what to do about emerging results, and connecting all this together in a coherent way.

What to monitor?

We can monitor three aspects of an innovation platform:

- Activities that aim to resolve a problem or take advantage of an opportunity. They may include technologies, methods and approaches, policies, empirical evidences or other tangible products. Monitoring activities makes it possible to track progress, provide feedback and improve performance.
- Process outputs include changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices of the platform members and the organizations or groups they represent, and the relationships among them. Monitoring process outcomes gives an understanding of how the innovation platform changes the knowledge, attitudes and practices of individuals and the links between them.
- Results are the impacts on the rural poor (and on other target beneficiaries). Monitoring results provides quantitative and qualitative evidence of the platform's work and allows it to be compared with other approaches.

Case 1. Outcome mapping for management

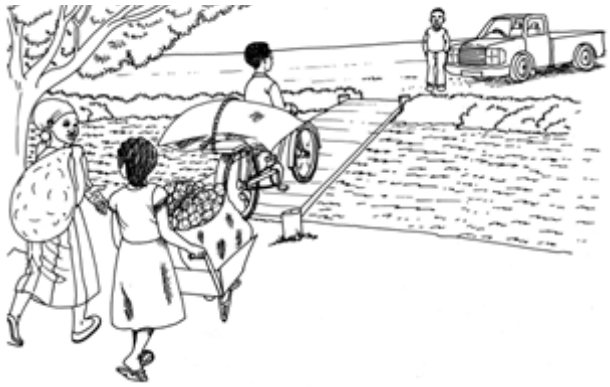
Every 4–8 weeks, members of the innovation platform in the ILRI/CARE imGoats project in Mozambique met to discuss behavioural changes of stakeholders in the goat value chain in Inhassoro district. They documented information on qualitative outcomes of the project. Equally important, they discussed changes that did not occur. Such discussions often led to changes in activity plans. This management function of the outcome mapping was not the initial objective. However members highly appreciated it and it strengthened implementation of the project.

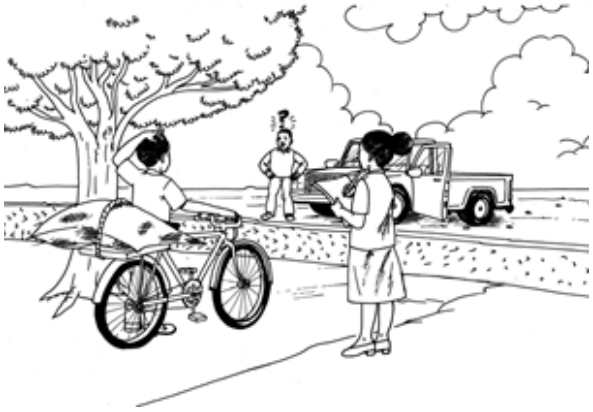
More: www.imgoats.org

Who monitors?

Monitoring may involve different people, but should involve platform members from the outset.

- Activity monitoring involves innovation platform members who are directly involved in the activity.
- At the process level, platform members participate, but researchers may also study how innovation affects the knowledge, attitudes and practices of participants and relationships among them.





Monitoring helps spot problems and make adjustments early

- Monitoring results involves members of the platform documenting any final outcomes to share more widely.

Monitoring may be designed and coordinated by the platform facilitator, the initiating organization, or a subgroup of platform members (including researchers). Where a platform is donor-supported, monitoring is normally initiated by whomever is responsible to the donor (and following any donnor-specified formats and frequencies). Depending on the complexity of the platform, it may be best to put a subgroup in charge of monitoring.

If the platform seeks to develop or test solutions to a specific problem of other people, it could also include end-users or beneficiaries to ensure feedback into the platform's activities.

Monitoring innovation platforms

While monitoring innovation platforms can be complex, the tools to do so already exist, or can be adapted to suit the specific situation. It is vital to base the monitoring on a coherent outcome logic model, feed the findings back to guide the platform's work, and develop information materials to explain them to non-members.

Case 2. Participatory video in the Nile

The Nile Basin Development Challenge used participatory video to bring community issues to the attention of planners and implementers. Participatory video is based on the premise that community members are experts about their livelihoods and landscapes. It empowers them to express their views and knowledge to others. The farmers identified their main land and water challenges and prioritized the subjects they wanted to document. They recorded video and audio footage, and showed them to the innovation platform members.

'We have a lot to learn from community members', said one platform member, a national researcher. 'I have now come to realize that the farming community is capable of identifying problems and indicating solutions'.

More: www.nilebdc.org

Monitoring innovation platforms can take several forms, and may shift over time. It is a good idea to use various methods to capture the quantitative and qualitative nature of the expected changes. It should track activities, processes and results in knowledge, attitudes and practices, network dynamics, emerging evidence and advocacy as well as changes at the household or community level.

For activity monitoring, project management tools such as Gantt charts, participatory budgets and after-action reviews are useful to track progress against plans.

Process monitoring tools include:

- **Outcome mapping** to clarify how the innovation process will effect change in partner organizations against a set of progress markers, supported by evidence (see Case 1).
- **Most significant change** technique to encourage reflection and structure stories from diverse participants.
- **Other tools** include digital storytelling, participatory video (see Case 2), photography, farmer field days and learning fairs that facilitate feedback in ways that overcome power imbalances.
- **Network analysis** to visualize changes in relationships among platform actors. Social network analysis gives a more robust view of both visual and quantitative measures of these relationships.
- **Participatory impact pathways** combine elements of outcome mapping and social network analysis to documents shifts in knowledge, attitudes and practices and relationship dynamics. It also helps clarify how platforms can influence others beyond their direct participants.

To monitor platform results, more traditional evaluation tools can be useful. For example, household surveys can gather panel data to compare the situation before and after (or with and without) the platform's interventions.

It is critical to allow time for the participants in an innovation platform to ponder what is working, what is not, and what adjustments are required. For external actors, it is useful to develop information materials to explain the innovation platform's approach and the monitoring methods, and to show how the platform results in changes.

Case 3. Understanding impact in the Limpopo

In the Limpopo river basin, monitoring innovation projects supported by the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food revealed that researchers were reluctant (or did not know how) to engage all stakeholders in setting the agenda, designing research, and monitoring results.

The Challenge Program recommended a suite of monitoring and evaluation tools to foster learning and identify expected changes. The participatory impact pathways tool was used to engage stakeholders in a structured participatory process to define goals, expected outcomes and direct and indirect changes. This promotes learning and provides a framework for action research on change processes.

Outcome logic models describe how a project goes from inputs to activities to outputs, how these outputs lead to outcomes, which in turn finally contribute to impacts.

More: waterandfood.org/basins/limpopo-2/

Case 4. Quantitative analysis of platforms

The Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa's sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Program conducted a quantitative evaluation of 36 innovation platforms in 8 countries. The evaluation looked at 108 randomly selected villages served by innovation platforms, along with two control villages for each. One of the controls used conventional research and development approaches, while the second had no recent research and development activities. Fifty-four thousand randomly selected households were covered in baseline, midterm and *post hoc* surveys. The evaluation found that innovation platforms performed better than conventional approaches in linking farmers to markets, technology adoption, income generation and poverty reduction.

Such surveys are costly, take time, and require analytical skills. Plus, it is hard to identify control villages because of the volume of development activities in Africa, and ethical concerns of depriving control villages of project benefits.

More: www.fara-africa.org/our-projects/ssa-cp/

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November 2013

Innovation platforms for agricultural value chain development

The markets and value chains approach has recently become fashionable in agricultural development interventions. So too have innovation platforms. This brief shows how innovation platforms can be a useful vehicle to promote market development.

Markets and value chains in agricultural development

Traditional approaches to agricultural development tend to emphasize food security—helping farmers to grow enough to feed themselves and their families, and perhaps a surplus to sell. More recently, concern with markets has become prominent. Even subsistence farmers need cash, goes the reasoning; they need to be able to grow things they can sell. And if they have a market for their produce, they have an incentive to grow more to earn more. This ushers in a virtuous cycle of higher yields and production, greater incomes, higher living standards, and more investment in production.

But linking farmers with markets is not easy. The physical infrastructure may need to be built or improved: storage and processing facilities, marketplaces, roads, electricity, communication facilities.

Definitions

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Value chains comprise an entire system of production, processing and marketing, from inception to the finished product. It consists of a series of value chain actors, including farmers, traders, processors, wholesalers, retailers and consumers, linked together by flows of products, finance, information and services. Chain supporters such as government regulators, financial institutions, research, extension and transporters provide various services to the chain and enable it to function.

Farmers may need to learn which crops or livestock to produce, and to adopt new production techniques so they can produce the quality and quantity required at the right time. They may need to invest in costly equipment (such as irrigation systems) and inputs (seeds and fertilizer). They

may need to get organized in groups so they can sell in bulk and negotiate better prices. They need links with potential buyers, information about prices and standards, and sources of credit. They may face resistance from traders who fear a loss of power and profits. Many government programs and projects aim to overcome these difficulties.

Value chain interventions go one stage further. Rather than looking at just the relationship between farmers and buyers, they consider the whole value chain from producers to consumers. They consider each step in the chain as well as all the various chain supporters. They also consider the chain context: regulations, overall economy etc.

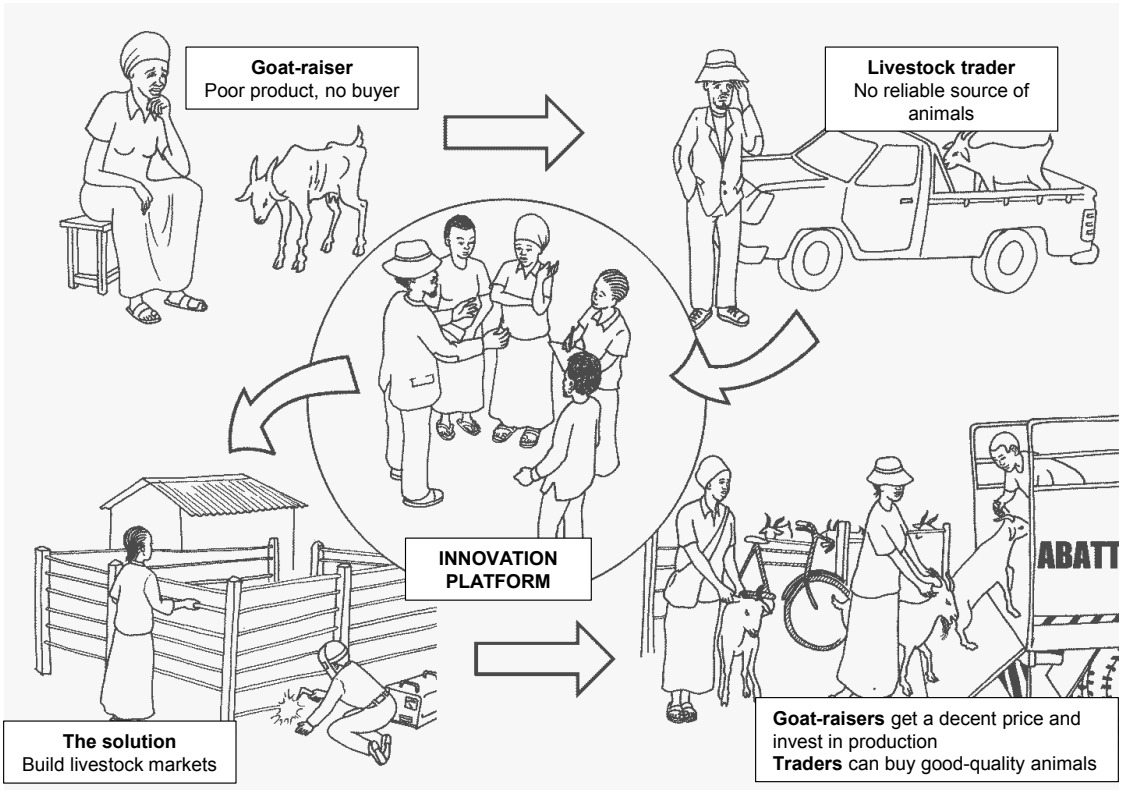
Innovation platforms and value chains

Innovation platforms offer a practical way to deal with the complex issues and multiple stakeholders involved in value chains. They bring together a range of stakeholders: farmers, traders, processors, input suppliers, credit suppliers, market information providers, insurance services, policymakers, extensionists and researchers. Together, these stakeholders design solutions to problems along the value chain.

Innovation platforms for value chains are unusual in that many of their members come from the private sector. Their motivations are commercial. They want to see profits. If the platform fails to deliver these, they will lose interest. On the other hand, if these partnerships are rewarding, they should last longer than the duration of the project.

Another unusual feature is that platform members may compete with each other. Farmers compete with each other to sell their produce; traders vie with their peers to buy and sell; processors compete to buy inputs and sell their outputs. It is also true between different stages in the chain: farmers want to sell at as high a price as possible, bypassing small-scale traders if they can. Traders, meanwhile, want to keep this business for themselves, and to buy for a low price. Peers at each stage may discover they can club together to charge higher prices or demand lower prices from suppliers.

Members of such platforms thus do not naturally see the benefits of cooperating and sharing information, making the task of the platform harder. An open agenda and skilful facilitation are needed. The facilitator must be neutral and help members realize that a more efficient value chain benefits all by providing greater volumes, better standards, higher efficiency, lower costs and less waste.



How an innovation platform in Zimbabwe overcame a bottleneck in the value chain for goats.

How do platform members benefit?

Farmers can benefit from such platforms by learning about market demand and requirements, changing what they produce and how they produce it. They can organize into groups to bulk their produce and negotiate better prices. They learn marketing skills and the importance of trust and long-term trading relationships. They may get services such as credit and improved production technologies via the platform. Production systems become more profitable.

Traders and processors can benefit by getting a larger, more reliable, better quality supply of inputs. They may welcome farmers getting organized as this reduces their transaction costs.

Service providers such as input suppliers, credit organizations and business services gain clients for their products and services.

Research and development organizations may use innovation platforms to engage market actors and to study and improve market and value chains.

Case 1. Linking potato farmers to markets

The Gataraga innovation platform in Rwanda identified several problems in potato marketing: low prices, poor harvests and inadequate postharvest handling.

It tried to overcome these by adding value (washing, sorting, grading and packaging); multiplying seed; obtaining planting materials of Kinigi, the preferred variety; dehaulming the plants before harvest; linking to credit; serving niche markets; and exploiting the favourable policy environment.

One stakeholder in the value chain, a private trader named Josephine Mukangusi, facilitated these interventions. She bought potatoes from the farmer members of the platform. The farmers agreed to use disease-free seeds and recommended inputs and crop management practices. The platform targeted niche markets in Kigali, such as hotels and supermarkets.

As a result, their potato deliveries increased from 700 kg/week in 2010 to 9000 kg/week in 2012. The price they received rose from USD 0.20 to 0.40/kg. Fifteen jobs were created. The trader and the farmers were able to get (and repay) credit from a commercial bank that was also a member of the platform.

More: Eliud Birachi (e.birachi@cgiar.org)

Platform members may engage in many initiatives, including new crops, introducing grades and standards, collective action to get inputs and credit, bulking produce for sale, market research, introducing new market institutions (such as livestock auctions), improving product quality and giving training.

Members can develop some of these initiatives themselves; for others, they need support from institutions such as research, the government or business consultants.

Gender may be an issue. Women and men farmers often have different interests and roles in the production and marketing system. Innovation platforms need to take these differences into account to avoid disadvantaging the women.

Types of innovation platforms

Three types of platforms deal with value chains.

- **Farmer-based.** This type of platform helps farmers market their produce. It invites members from further along the value chain, such as buyers and processors, along with service providers such as financial organizations. It may deliberately avoid certain groups or individuals—such as traders who the farmers think exploit them. A goal of such a platform may be to enable the farmers to sell directly to larger urban buyers. Such platforms may facilitate negotiations on behalf of the farmers, arrange deals and coordinate production and trading. See the cases from Rwanda (Case 1) and Burkina Faso (Case 2).

- **Value-chain-based.** This type of platform focuses on the value chain as a whole. It may be established by a research or development organization, or perhaps by a leading actor in the value chain, such as a processor or supermarket chain. It aims to identify and overcome bottlenecks in the chain and find ways to make the chain more efficient (see Case 3 for an example).

- **Accidental.** A third type starts by accident. Such innovation platforms are established to deal with another topic, such as animal feeding or crop production. But members realize that market development is an issue, so shift at least part of the platform's attention to deal with it.

Case 2. Cereal value chain in Burkina Faso

Members of the Nabonswendé farmers' organization in northern Burkina Faso were not able to supply the quality and quantity of cereals demanded by the market. An innovation platform coordinated by SNV addressed this problem by bringing farmers together with processors, traders, input suppliers, technical specialists, and microfinance and research institutions. The platform helped members overcome long-running disputes about farmers not repaying loans and not respecting agreements with traders and input suppliers.

A microfinance institution from the nearby town agreed to make up to 20% more credit available to fund inputs, seeds and equipment—as long as the farmers had a guaranteed market for their crops. A representative of the traders promised to buy all the output if the farmers produced at least 20 t of bulked grain. The president of the association agreed on behalf of the farmers: he said they could produce more than 40 t of grain if traders would buy it all.

More: Hubert Somé (hsome@snvworld.org)

Case 3. The rice value chain in Ghana

The Ghana Rice Interprofessional Body aims to promote locally produced rice. This national innovation platform undertook consumer analyses to understand the quality criteria used by urban consumers and their willingness to pay for Ghanaian (rather than imported) rice. The platform linked rice farmers to women processors and buyers in Accra. This opened a new urban market for the farmers. Because the processors did not have enough money to buy rice in bulk, the platform helped them obtain the necessary credit. This enabled the value chain to handle larger volumes, improving its efficiency.

More: Cadilhon and Even (2012)

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November 2013

Communication in innovation platforms

Innovation does not happen in the dark. Innovation happens when knowledge and ideas from different people are combined to arrive at new solutions. Innovation platforms are like a switchboard that connects different 'light bulbs' (people) together to shed light on bigger issues and stimulate brighter ideas.

Communication is the electricity that powers the platforms. It helps to create a steady flow of information to and from different parts of a platform. It regulates power flows, avoids overloads and blackouts on the innovation network, and connects to other parts of the network. Communication is a crucial part of facilitating the process of innovation within an innovation platform (Brief 10).

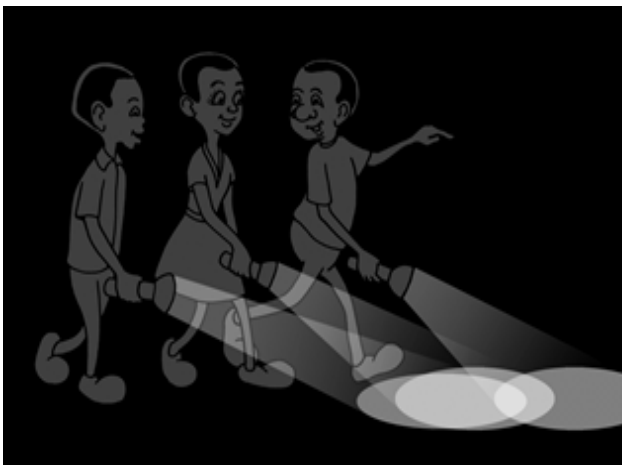
Communication combines different 'energy sources' to power the platform at different phases of its development. The goal is not just to produce or disseminate more information, but rather to use communication processes to power changes identified by the platform.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Communication comprises a broad range of practices and approaches which include information management, publishing, use of information and communication technologies, communication for development, knowledge sharing and knowledge management.

Communication among platform members. At the outset, communication helps bring platform members together to identify common objectives. It helps manage information and ensure an institutional memory. It ensures that all members' voices are heard and gives them ownership of the platform's work. It clarifies everyone's agenda and the vision of change that brings them together.



Communication helps align platform members

Communication with outsiders. Communication also links the platform and its members to people and organizations outside. It does this by engaging with other networks, providing information and making linkages to relevant groups. It also helps disseminate information for people to act on it.

Three roles of communication

Communication serves three major purposes in powering innovation platforms:

- Engagement and dialogue
- Documentation and outreach
- Learning

Engagement and dialogue

Communication among platform members happens everywhere: at platform meetings, between meetings, online, on the radio, and face to face. Creating a common understanding and tapping into the views of different members is necessary for a platform to deliver its goals. Communication is about making sure these conversations happen, frequently enough, and well enough. Effective and trusted facilitation is essential.

- Example: The International Livestock Research Institute brought people together in roundtables to discuss fodder in Ethiopia. The meetings were short, stimulating, focused on a particular theme, and focused on actions and policy change. Held twice a year, they were more effective than longer, more frequent meetings (http://fodderadoption.wordpress.com/tag/fap).

Tools for engagement and dialogue

- Facilitated meetings and events
- Study tours and exchanges
- Role plays and games
- Networking

Documentation and outreach

Activities, learning and events need to be documented. Why? To build an institutional memory for the platform members, and so outsiders can understand what the platform achieved and how it did so.

Researchers often see innovation platforms primarily as a way to disseminate their research findings. This should be avoided. Information disseminated through the platform should meet the demands of the participants.

- Example: In Ethiopia, the Nile Basin Development Challenge (Case 1) uses web-based tools such as wikis (nilebdc.wikispaces.com) to support collaboration, Yammer (www.yammer.com) to stimulate internal conversations, and blogs (http://nilebdc.org/) to communicate with outsiders. Locally, it spreads information via a newsletter and minutes of meetings.

Tools for documentation and outreach

- Internet and web-based tools
- Documents, newsletters and publications
- Video and photographs
- Resource centres
- Radio, phone, text messages, media

Case 1: Communication in the Nile

The Nile Basin Development Challenge in Ethiopia illustrates how a range of communication tools contribute to its goals.

The project supports local innovation platforms at three locations, as well as a policy-oriented national platform on land and water management. The local platforms bring together people living in and working with a particular local community. Communication efforts include documenting and explaining local issues using participatory video, capturing community perspectives using photos and photo-films, facilitating engagement and learning using games, facilitating regular stakeholder discussions of opportunities and challenges, documenting insights and lessons by project staff using regular team meetings, compilation of most significant change stories, wiki collaboration tools, and sharing stories and updates on the internet for wider audiences.

The national platform's communication efforts include position and issue papers, regular platform meetings on different topics, meeting reports and recommendations for wider audiences, groups working on specific issues, online publishing and dissemination of messages.

More: http://nilebdc.org/

Learning

In innovation platforms, learning breeds innovation and sharpens the capacity to innovate over time. Communication brings people together to learn individually and as a group, and to present what they have discovered to others. Innovative communication methods can break through cultural barriers or overcome status differences by getting people to play non-traditional roles.

- Example: The NBDC tested games and role-playing. It used a 'Happy Strategies' game where participants find ways to manage water, control erosion and grow food in a particular landscape (http://nilebdc.org/tag/game). This game is based on a detailed technical evidence base, translated into a format that development workers and others can use to assess interventions. The game allows researchers, farmers and community members to understand and discuss different strategies in a more open way.

Enabling and disabling factors

Various factors can help or hinder communication within the innovation platform.

Power and representation (Brief 4). Power relations between people and organizations in the platform can bias the discussions and decisions made because some voices are heard, while others are not. They can muddle conversations, impair relationships and destroy trust between members.

Capacity (Briefs 8 and 10). Effective communication requires a wide range of skills: in interpersonal communication, facilitating processes and events, website management, radio and video production, publishing, design and public awareness. Platforms are more likely to thrive if they are supported by strong communications and have strong interpersonal communication among all members (Case 2).

Resources. Time and money available have major impact on the approaches and tools that can be used. They affect the size of the communication team, the intensity of efforts to bring people together, and the communication tools used. Access to electricity and the internet has a big effect on the choice of communication approaches; knowledge of local languages can also be critical.

Tools for learning

- Participatory video
- Story telling
- After action reviews
- Learning games
- Journals
- Most significant change stories

Culture. Local norms, values and preferences can have a strong influence on the quality of communication. Innovation platforms are likely to communicate better if the members are curious, open-minded, tolerant of risk and failure, generous and inclined towards critical thinking. In such groups, communication will be a powerful tool to help the innovation platform achieve its goals.

Case 2: Communication in RiPPLE

RiPPLE, a project focusing on water supply and sanitation in Ethiopia, invested heavily in increasing the capacity of local champions. It spent a lot of time on daily informal communications to provide information to and assist the local planners.

The program provided training to platform members on various methods of process documentation, including photo stories, most significant change stories, short videos and films, outcome journals and mapping, and case studies. A resource centre was established to give people access to research products, newsletters, films and books related to water and sanitation.

More: www.rippleethiopia.org

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November 2013

Developing innovation capacity through innovation platforms

One of the most important things that innovation platforms do is to build the capacity of their members to innovate. This is a crucial function. Innovation capacity is vital if the innovation platform is to achieve its aims. It is the invisible glue that ties successful innovation platforms together—the 'capacity to get things done' (see the Definitions box).

This brief uses the analogy of a traditional African cooking pot to explain how innovation capacity is developed within an innovation platform. It draws on three examples of innovation platforms: in Babure, Uganda; Gwanda, Zimbabwe; and three regions in Ethiopia.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Innovation capacity enables groups of people to shape their own future by taking advantage of opportunities and dealing with changing situations. Some key elements of innovation capacity include: self-organization, learning new skills, changing mindsets, valuing others' roles in innovation, having a holistic view, being able to adapt to changing situations, creating new ideas, recognizing opportunities, being proactive, using indigenous ideas, and looking to the future.

Like a cooking pot

An innovation platform is like a cooking pot. The pot is the container where innovation capacity can develop, given the right preconditions and ingredients. It is a collective cooking pot: innovation platforms are about collective action to solve complex problems.

Various people gather around the pot: farmers, government officials, community leaders, researchers, private investors, and civil society. These are the members of the innovation platform. They all help to cook: feeding the fire, adding ingredients, stirring the contents, and serving the broth.

Each contributes specific skills, knowledge and capacities—the ingredients that go into the pot.

There is no one recipe, but a few key ingredients can make success more likely: scientific knowledge, local knowledge, facilitation techniques, training, mixed with social learning.

- A helping of scientific knowledge enabled members of the Babure innovation platform in Uganda to increase their sorghum production (Case 1).

- A dollop of local knowledge, people's networks and their skills enabled farmers in Zimbabwe to come together to buy feed in bulk, so negotiating prices down by more than half (Case 2).

Case 1. A new sorghum drink for Uganda

The Babure innovation platform in Uganda focuses on sorghum. The platform first tackled the productivity of the crop. Researchers in the platform recommended several measures, including improving the soil fertility, resulting in improved yields. But that led to a new problem: the market could not absorb the larger amounts of sorghum the farmers were growing. Prices fell, and farmers could not sell their crop.

Platform members realized the need to create a new market. They suggested developing a new product to use the extra grain. Two platform members (Makerere University and the Huntex group, a private sector processor), jointly developed a non-alcoholic beverage made from sorghum. This is an improved form of a local drink known as 'Bushera'. The Makerere researchers managed to prolong the shelf life of this drink from a few days to about two years without additives.

Known as 'Mamera', this patented product is now available in supermarkets and generates income and jobs for the farmers and the processor.

More: Adewale Adekunle (aadekunle@fara-africa.org)

- A handful of facilitation techniques fosters understanding of the expectations of all stakeholders, the role they play in the overall system and their relationship with others (Brief 10).

- A fourth important ingredient is social learning. In Ethiopia, a learning and practice alliance, driven through process documentation and exchange visits, was formed by nine platforms in three regions and at the national level (Case 3).

Mixing ingredients together is no good without a catalyst: the fire.

The catalyst may be an external organization that initiates the platform and triggers innovation. Or it may be internal factors and market conditions. In Babure, for example, the market could not absorb the amounts of sorghum that platform members produced. That was a catalyst for developing a new product, a sorghum-based drink.

What comes out of the pot? After bringing ingredients and helping with the cooking, the chefs naturally want to enjoy the bowls of soup they have prepared. Innovation platforms can serve up various benefits for their members: more profits from product diversification in Babure (Case 1), or cheaper feed prices in Gwanda (Case 2).

Innovation capacity

What is innovation capacity? It is like the cooking process in the pot. It is where individual platform members, and the platform as a whole, develop the abilities to find solutions to problems and to respond to opportunities.

There is no single way to develop this capacity. It may seem effortless to an outsider: outcomes (tasty, nutritious soup) suddenly emerge from an unruly mess of ingredients.

But there are a few essentials: the participants have to interact well; the facilitation has to be suitable, and all those involved must have the patience to let the process unfold (Brief 10).

Paying attention to the process and to learning by the group is central to developing a sustained capacity to innovate, as is appropriate training to develop relevant capacities locally.

Brief 1 outlines a seven-step process which innovation platforms generally follow, from initiation to analysis and learning. Innovation capacity can (and indeed does) occur in all these stages.

For example, many straightforward methodologies exist to help innovation platform members identify problems and come up with innovations to address them. But it is during the later stages—testing and refining solutions, analysis and learning—that most of this 'magic' takes place.

Innovation capacity can go beyond the members of the platform. They can share their new experiences and insights with people and organizations outside the platform: they share their soup with others.

The cases here illustrate innovation capacity at the local level, it can also be developed at higher levels, such as in policymaking (Brief 2). These processes can be sustained and replicated if they are monitored and documented (Case 3 and Brief 5).

The tangible results of an innovation platform (better incomes, lower costs etc.) are a result of an intangible product: innovation capacity. Perhaps because it is intangible, innovation capacity is rarely explicitly included in a project design. It is often seen as an implicit side-product.

Even in RiPPLE (Case 3), which made special efforts on this front, process documentation eventually fell through the cracks and was abandoned two years into the program as management and donors emphasized formal monitoring instead.

Not a panacea

Just as a cooking pot is not the only way to prepare food, innovation platforms are not the only way to enhance innovation capacity. And if the pot is rusty—if it lets unhealthy power relationships taint the contents, the soup will be a lot less tasty. Brief 4 explains how to avoid this.

Project designers should be wary of innovation platforms as a 'solution looking for a problem'. They should identify the right conditions or entry points for this type of intervention.

Case 2. Self-organization and changing mind-sets in Zimbabwe

In the 2011 dry season, livestock farmers in Gwanda faced severe feed shortages. Using information and skills they had gained from their innovation platform, the farmers began to buy feed in bulk. Local agrodealers were selling feed at USD 21–26 for a 50 kg bag. But the manufacturer in Bulawayo sold the same bag for USD 12.50. The dealers justified the difference by pointing at the low turnover of feed.

The farmers clubbed together through the platform to buy a lorry-load of feed at a time. In October and November 2011, 250 farmers collectively bought 40 t of feed worth USD 15,000. Each farmer spent an average of USD 60 on feed. By acting together, they bought the feed at a price that was more cost-effective. And they could feed their animals through the dry season. Now, neither ICRISAT (the originator of the innovation platform) nor the platform itself is involved. Farmers continue to self-organize and engage with the local private sector suppliers and traders.

Through collective action in the innovation platform, farmers understood the value of their livestock; they were able to analyse the constraints (high local prices) and resolved this through efficient problem analysis and they devised solutions by pooling resources.

More: Andre van Rooyen (a.vanrooyen@cgiar.org)

Finally, innovation platforms are not meant to last forever. Once the underlying problems they were formed to address are resolved, they should not be kept alive artificially.

On the other hand, the innovation capacity that develops through the process can (and should) live on—again underpinning its importance as a key output of the innovation platform.

Enhanced innovation capacity is one of the most sustainable outcomes that innovation platforms can strive for.

Case 3: Using process documentation to maximize social learning in Ethiopia

RiPPLE, a water-supply and sanitation project in Ethiopia (www.rippleethiopia.org), used process documentation to record activities of the innovation platforms it sponsored. This aimed to chronicle the involvement of key actors, understand how their capacity developed, check how learning manifested itself, and assess how culture enabled or hampered this learning.

Social learning happened in each of the platforms, with ongoing documentation by the RiPPLE team and platform members; across platforms through exchange visits between regional platform members; and across scales by inviting *woreda* platform members to present findings at the regional platform meeting, and *woreda*/regional platform members to do the same at FLoWS meetings. Monitoring and evaluation helped capture progress and process around these platforms too.

More: Ewen Le Borgne (e.leborgne@cgiar.org)

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November 2013

Linking action at different levels through innovation platforms

Innovation platforms typically operate in a limited area: their own village or district. But agricultural constraints may exist at wider levels making local changes ineffectual. Introducing new agricultural practices in a village, for example, may not be enough if national policies prevent farmers from getting inputs. Improving farmer incomes may mean persuading a national supermarket to change its buying policy.

Complex natural resource management problems involve interactions and trade-offs at different levels (farm, watershed, basin, landscape), which cut across administrative levels and require actions from each.

Similarly, national level innovation platforms may lack the ability to intervene at the local level: they lack the information they need to develop appropriate policies, and the local contacts they need to put them into effect.

This brief discusses ways to facilitate learning and problem solving across innovation platforms at different levels (vertical linkages) and between initiatives located at the same level (horizontal linkages).

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

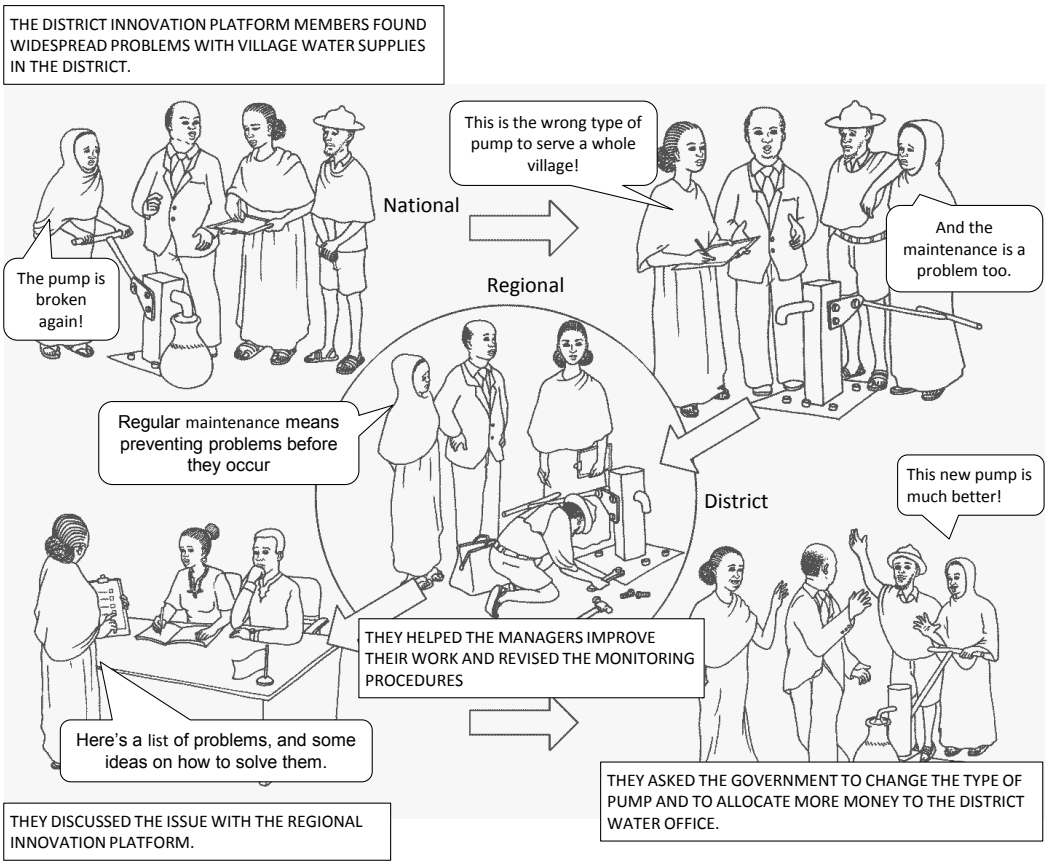
Vertical linkages occur among innovation platforms organized at different levels: community, district and national.

Horizontal linkages occur among platforms situated at the same level (e.g. in multiple districts) to strengthen their bargaining position or for learning.

Vertical linkages across levels

Platforms at different levels offer different things.

- Local innovation platforms aim to generate action on the ground. They enable communities to engage directly with innovation processes.
- National innovation platforms aim to influence policy processes and negotiate access to national and international markets (Brief 2).



Linking innovation platforms vertically (across levels) and horizontally (with other platforms at the same level) has many benefits

- Intermediate levels are important as this is where policies are often operationalized and where monitoring of policy should occur.
- International platforms can explore high risk or controversial issues at the national level, but which may be further developed at national level once their importance is proven (Case 1).

Linking these different types of innovation platforms offers several potential benefits.

Scaling out successful innovations. National and intermediate levels can help scale out successful innovations from the local level. Linking from local to higher level platforms can shortcut lengthy processes to disseminate promising innovations.

Empowering local actors to influence policy. Local platforms can empower local actors to hold higher levels of government to account. This happened in RiPPLE (www.rippleethiopia.org) where district officials used evidence generated by an innovation platform to advocate for increased budgets and new water supply technology choices (Tucker et al. 2013).

Fostering dialogue in policymaking. Strengthening linkages between platforms at different levels can stimulate learning and dialogue in policy processes. For example, national policymakers may start to understand why farmers are reluctant to improve the management of natural resources if they lose yield in the short term (Brief 2). Intermediate levels are important—often neglected—ways to make these local to national links happen.

Establishing innovation platforms at more than one level is one way to stimulate this kind of coordinated action, for potentially greater impact.

Developing value chains. Large businesses and farmer associations are important to link producers to higher value markets, and to address industry practices or standards which hinder market access. In Nigeria, the MARKETS program supported 'innovation clusters' of small-scale sorghum producers which helped them to organize and more efficiently supply major breweries.

Increasing legitimacy and learning. Making local links can enhance the quality of policy processes and outcomes (Brief 2). It also improves the legitimacy of national or international platforms.

Innovation platforms across multiple levels can channel interactions and help provide feedback from local levels, although influence on decisions is never guaranteed by the presence of a platform alone. They can also provide a forum to integrate work on different themes, although care must be taken not to dilute the focus.

Horizontal linkages

Horizontal linkages are those that connect platforms or initiatives working at the same level: within a project or between projects, from district to district or from country to country.

Cross-learning. Sharing experiences across platforms or initiatives working on similar issues may encourage learning and stimulate innovation. There must be a common interest and a basis to assume that lessons will be transferable. Papa Andina, a program led by the International Potato Center, for example, brought local level platforms in different countries together at periodic international meetings for horizontal evaluation (Thiele et al. 2006).

Joining forces to empower local actors. Where several platforms identify similar constraints, they can join forces to make a stronger cases for action. These may cut across sectors. For example, a program working on irrigation development and another on livestock may both find that a lack of local credit is holding up their efforts. Linking groups of small-scale producers can also increase their power to negotiate with others in the value chain.

Creating linkages

Some programs establish platforms at multiple levels and developed mechanisms for cross-learning, both vertically and horizontally. This can involve:

- **Cross-representation**, in which one or two members from each platform attend meetings of others, to share updates and help develop complementary activities. It is important to think about who will represent a platform fairly at other levels and be able to work effectively in different settings. The presence of a higher level, more powerful actor must not be allowed to suppress discussions.
- **Participation in activities,** such as research studies or pilot interventions, across platforms. This may well be an effective route to learning; it can be very powerful, for example, for higher level actors to speak to communities and see realities on the ground. Horizontally, it can enable different platforms to see how others tackle challenges and gain new ideas.
- **Experience sharing,** in which programs organize events for representatives to come together. This may be most suitable for cross-learning between platforms at the same level that face similar challenges.
- **Communication materials** made available online or handed out at meetings.
- **Informal communication**, where links between platforms are made around particular issues or emerging needs. This may involve subgroups rather than whole platforms.

Facilitators are key to making these links happen. They can initiate and support conversations between platform members and identify opportunities for joint learning and action. Platforms need to be adaptable and avoid unnecessary communication requirements—flexible and informal modes of communication are key (Brief 7).

Are multiple platforms necessary?

Establishing multiple platforms allows strategic and coordinated problem-solving across multiple levels, on clearly determined issues, on a regular basis with a relevant set of stakeholders. But it has costs, as platform facilitation and support is resource-intensive (Brief 12). It also adds to the number of meetings, networks and forums which stakeholders engage in, so any new platform or linkage should be established only if it adds clear value. It may be preferable to engage existing groupings, or just to work with relevant organizations and individuals.

Some examples:

Link to existing policy forums for influence. Many countries already have groups that play formal or informal roles in decision-making. Where these are effective in influencing policy, bringing issues identified by platforms to them may be more effec-

tive than setting up a parallel platform. The risk is that agendas may conflict and priorities of the innovation platforms may not represent priority issues for the whole group (Brief 2).

Make informal links to relevant people and organizations. In some cases it is enough to simply involve people or organizations from outside the platform. This can be a good way to bring in specific expertise that is not in the platform, for example, from universities or certifying bodies.

Capitalize on existing contacts. Platform members have their own contacts who may be valuable platform partners. In the Convergence of Sciences-Strengthening Innovation Systems (CoS-SIS) program in Ghana, one district level platform member was a warehouse manager for an international cocoa buyer and could get information on cocoa pricing, helping producers in the platform enter new markets. Making such linkages needs innovation platform champions able to identify opportunities for collaboration across different levels and connect different stakeholders and networks (Case 2). These may be researchers, facilitators or platform members.

Case 2. Connected champions make links

To address barriers and enable change, platforms need people able to build linkages beyond a platform. The role of these network champions is clearly seen in the CoS-SIS program. In West Africa, a village level innovation platform wanted to tackle problems caused by local oil-palm processing mills burning tyres for fuel. The resulting pollution was harming villagers' health and lowering the quality of the product. The Director of Agriculture in the district brought actors from across the palm-oil value chain together to listen to the concerns of platform members. As a result, the District Assembly banned the burning of tyres.
More: Nederlof and Pyburn (2012).

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November 2013

Facilitating innovation platforms

'By noon the meeting was completely derailed. Julius looked tired and confused. The night before he had made a detailed program, but now it seemed all in vain. He wanted to talk about water conservation, but farmers were more interested in a new pest species that affected their crops. The representative of the department of agriculture had apologized for the meeting, while the water conservation expert felt lost'.

Sounds familiar? Some say that innovation platforms are as good as the facilitator who guides them. Although facilitation is not easy, this does not mean it cannot be done effectively. This brief provides some guidelines.

Innovation platforms are groups of stakeholders, often with different backgrounds, who come together to address challenges and opportunities in a particular issue or area. Members represent organizations or groups that have different but complementary objectives and interests, such as farmers, traders, research, government etc. (Brief 1).

These stakeholders do not naturally want to cooperate or share information. They may have divergent interests, or even compete with each other. Skilful facilitation is needed so they agree on common goals and activities.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Facilitation of innovation is a flexible and adaptive process during which facilitator(s) manage dialogue and stimulate collective problem analysis by multiple stakeholders to overcome challenges or make use of opportunities.

What is facilitation about?

To bring about lasting and positive change, an innovation platform needs to address issues on and off the farm. Each issue may involve a different set of stakeholders. It is necessary to influence not only the way farmers think and make decisions, but how other stakeholders behave too. These system-level changes need careful facilitation (Case 1).

Case 1 Managing change in small ruminant value chains in Zimbabwe

Innovation platforms and associated interactions among diverse stakeholders has led to changes for small-scale livestock keepers in southwestern Zimbabwe. Managing and facilitating the process over time helped achieve impact.

Initially the platform in Gwanda identified goat production and marketing challenges. Once it was confirmed that the most limiting factor was market access, the platform involved other stakeholders (buyers, transporters and auctioneers) and local government structures mandated with livestock marketing. Once the local markets were developed, the focus of the platform shifted towards the processors (the abattoir) and the input side, linking farmers to feed suppliers. This illustrates how the agenda and composition of the innovation platform evolved over time.

While the innovation platform is a dynamic process, it should not lose its primary focus to develop functional local agricultural systems, even though this may require us to do a lot of innovation platform work off-farm!

More: Andre van Rooyen (a.vanrooyen@cgiar.org)

Innovation platforms often go through a cycle that includes initiation, deciding on a focus, identifying options, testing and refining solutions, developing capacity, implementing and scaling up, and analysing to learn (Brief 1). Platform members have to be guided through each of these steps. This requires a range of skills, some interpersonal and others more technical in nature.

Maintaining everyone's interest and commitment is vital to ensure that the platform focuses on issues that matter to its stakeholders. The stakeholders need to understand how their individual roles contribute to the larger whole and that collective action towards common goals benefits all.

Innovation platforms are often needed because the players involved were not communicating in the first place. Trust and mutual respect need to be fostered between actors in developing new or strengthening ongoing relationships. It may be necessary to avoid or resolve conflicts, and to change the composition of the platform in order to deal with new aspects as they arise.

Innovation platforms operate in changing environments, and they aim to promote change. Flexibility is important to adjust objectives and activities to changes. All the stakeholders need to be aware of this and understand the process. It is the facilitator's task to make sure they are on board.

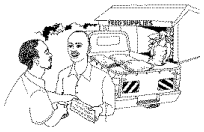
Different functions and roles

Facilitation has moved away from its usual role in meetings and groups, to that of knowledge or innovation brokering with a wider set of stakeholders. This requires a clear understanding of the different expectations of all stakeholders, the roles they play and their relationship with other players. To achieve this, facilitators in innovation platforms can provide a range of functions. These include:

Establish the innovation platform. Once a problem requiring an innovation process is identified, a facilitator convenes an initial meeting of stakeholders. Participants analyse the problem, and additional stakeholders are identified and invited to the next meeting.

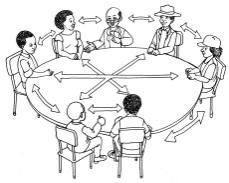
Identify issues. Facilitators help members chart a platform's course and define the challenges and opportunities it will address. Facilitators may solicit further studies or consultations to identify or confirm problems, information needs or policy frameworks. Often a platform tries to tackle too many issues at the same time, or drifts off target. The facilitator should make sure it stays focused on priority tasks (as identified by the platform).

Manage meetings. After a platform is set up and the key issues identified, a facilitator convenes and manages regular platform meetings. He or she ensures that objectives are reached, and that all members can express their views. He or she energizes the group or slows it down, as needed.



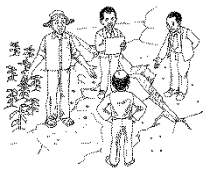
Support activities outside meetings. Much of the innovation process and the platform's work takes place outside formal meetings. The facilitator coordinates these activities by establishing working groups, coordinating the

allocation of tasks, helping set objectives, and ensuring they are implemented, documented and followed up. He or she builds relationships with other stakeholders and invites them to collaborate with the platform. Outcomes of the activities are shared with the members at subsequent meetings.



Manage communication. The facilitator nurtures relationships among the members, coordinates interactions, negotiates if needed, and facilitates collective learning (Brief 7).

Deal with conflict and power. Stakeholders often perceive others as competitors, so do not share information. They may want to monopolize the process and prevent others from participating. The facilitator prevents such power struggles and addresses them if they arise. He or she tries to help the platform members realize they all have an interest in finding solutions and creating opportunities (Brief 4).



Monitor, document and report. The facilitator ensures that meetings and the process are well documented and reported (Brief 5). He or she recaps periodically to make connections between sessions.

Facilitate and advocate institutional change. The facilitator helps the platform advocate for policy changes, generate new business models, and stimulate new relationships among the actors (Brief 2).

Develop capacities. Although many innovation platforms focus on the immediate job at hand, it is important to ensure that stakeholders learn and develop their capacity to innovate on other topics (Brief 8). The facilitator helps them reflect on innovation processes and their perspectives on them.

Skills and attributes

Good facilitators maximize cooperation and collaboration among members of the platform. They possess critical skills: flexibility, a natural networker, a knack for developing cooperation and partnerships, a strong and wide personal network, a capacity to manage relations over time, a good sense of negotiation and power dynamics, the ability to manage conflict, a listening ear, and group facilitation skills.

As process oriented approaches do not have fixed goals and time frames, it is important that a facilitator guides members towards development outcomes. A facilitator should have a broad knowledge about the subject, the system it is embedded in, and the fields of expertise of the members. He or she does not have to be a content specialist, nor have preconceived notions on ways to solve problems.

The facilitator must fully identify with a participatory process, be sensitive to cultural and gender differences, and help weaker stakeholders engage. This may lead to conflicts where the facilitator has to mediate between interest groups (Case 2).

Case 2. Mediating power dynamics: Lessons from the Nile Basin Development Challenge

As part of a project in the Ethiopian highlands, district level innovation platforms were formed. The starting points were the identification of agreed natural resources issue to work on. During a series of 'community engagement exercises' in one of the sites, farmers identified termite infestation as a priority issue. Local government representatives, however, insisted that soil erosion should be prioritized. The facilitators realized that if government agendas dominated the process it was likely to reduce community engagement. Together with researchers, the facilitators identified an intervention that met several needs: a termite-resistant fodder species called Chomo grass. This would help to conserve soils, rehabilitate grazing areas and provide livestock feed.

To help platform members reach consensus, facilitators had to understand the social and political context and local power dynamics, and help members understand that their issues and concerns were interconnected. It was critical to establish trust. Instead of tackling the issue of government dominance head on, they encouraged joint learning through active engagement.

More: http://nilebdc.org

Who facilitates?

A facilitator must be neutral and objective, able to work with all, and not push any particular agenda.

Case 3. Towards self-facilitation: The imGoats project in India and Mozambique

The imGoats project on goat production and marketing in India and Mozambique used innovation platforms to help goat producers, small-scale traders and input and service providers improve goat value chains.

Two international NGOs (BAIF in India and CARE in Mozambique) took the lead, but the platforms were meant to become self-managed. In Mozambique, members elected a team of value chain actors to take over the facilitation of the platforms, while in India community animal health workers volunteered to do so. Although they gradually took over responsibilities for facilitation and coordination, they faced two big challenges: linking different actors outside the platform, and strategic networking with government agencies. Especially in the initial stages, they needed support and capacity development from the project managers.

More: http://imgoats.org

The person facilitating may change over time. As the platform matures, the original facilitator may allow someone else to take on the role (Case 3). Some tasks may rotate among members.

Whether a facilitator should be an insider or an outsider depends on the purpose and main focus of the platform, the sensitivity of the topic, as well as local capacities. In general, facilitation should stimulate and support stakeholders to work as a self-organized and self-managed innovation system. Handing the process over to local intermediaries (or facilitators) is part of that process. It is often easier to take over the facilitation of meetings than the wider role.

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November 2013

Innovation platforms to support natural resource management

Natural resource problems afflict many African smallholders: they include low soil fertility, low yields, erosion, deforestation, fodder shortages, and lack of water. Individual farmers or communities cannot deal with these problems by themselves, so need outside help. Innovation platforms are a promising way of tackling them because they bring together farmers and other community members with a range of other stakeholders.

Why innovation platforms for natural resource management?

Natural resources problems in farming communities can be hard to tackle piecemeal. Some examples:

Scale. Many of these problems are beyond the control of individual farmers, or even of the community as a whole on its own. While individual farmers may be able to control erosion on their own fields by planting along the contour, for example, there is little they can do to prevent erosion upstream. Such issues require larger scale intervention.

Complexity. Natural resource management issues tend to be complex, involving an interplay of bio physical, social and economic factors. An apparently biophysical problem (gullying) may have its roots in social or economic issues (overgrazing, land tenure). A technical solution (checkdams) may be difficult to implement because of a lack of organization (a social issue) or no credit to buy the inputs needed (an economic issue).

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual member.

Conflict. Many natural resource problems involve groups with divergent interests. Herders and farmers may compete over the rights to use land or water; farmers upstream may inadvertently cause erosion and flooding downstream.

Cost. Some interventions are relatively cheap and easy; think of contour farming or grass bunds, for example. Others require significant levels of investment, with lots of labour, inputs, technology and

equipment. Examples include checkdams, terraces, water harvesting and irrigation systems, reforestation schemes and fencing to control grazing. Large-scale community involvement and outside investment are often needed to implement these.

Information. Farmers often lack the information and skills they need to conserve natural resources. Even if they realize the link between deforestation and erosion, they may not know what can be done to solve the problem.

Incentives. In addition, the people 'causing' a problem may have few incentives to solve it. Natural resource interventions tend to have long payoff periods, or benefit someone other than the person who invests. These can be illustrated as follows:

- *Pay today, benefit in the future*. It is obviously in farmers' long-term interests to solve problems such as overgrazing and erosion. Deteriorating soils, vegetation and water availability are in no-one's interest. But overcoming these problems may entail major costs and little short-term gain. Building terraces, installing checkdams and planting trees are costly, and may take valuable land out of cultivation. Many such interventions have such a long payback period that individual farmers may not see a (direct) return on their investment. Outside investment is needed.

- *Pay today, someone else benefits*. The benefits of natural resource interventions often accrue to someone else rather than to the communities on whose land the conservation measures are made. A hill village may need to restrict grazing, plant trees or control erosion (all of which involve significant efforts and costs) to stop the community downstream from being flooded or its water supply from drying up.

- *Pay today, watch others get a free ride*. One way to prevent overgrazing is to reduce the size of flocks or to stop them from grazing in certain protected areas. That works only if everyone plays along. If some people flout the rules and continue to herd large flocks on the protected land, the vegetation cannot recover. Those who comply resent this, and are tempted to break the rules themselves.

Case 1. SIMLESA project: Innovation platforms on maize and legumes

SIMLESA is a four year (2010–14), multi-institutional project led by CIMMYT, focusing on maize–legume cropping systems. It covers five countries in eastern and southern Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, and Tanzania). Its objectives include understanding and developing value chains for maize and legumes, and developing and testing new crop varieties and integrated cropping systems to improve production. Innovation platforms are central to the project approach. Platform members include farmers, community leaders, seed companies, stockists, transporters, processors, equipment dealers, microfinance organizations, research and extension institutions, and government.

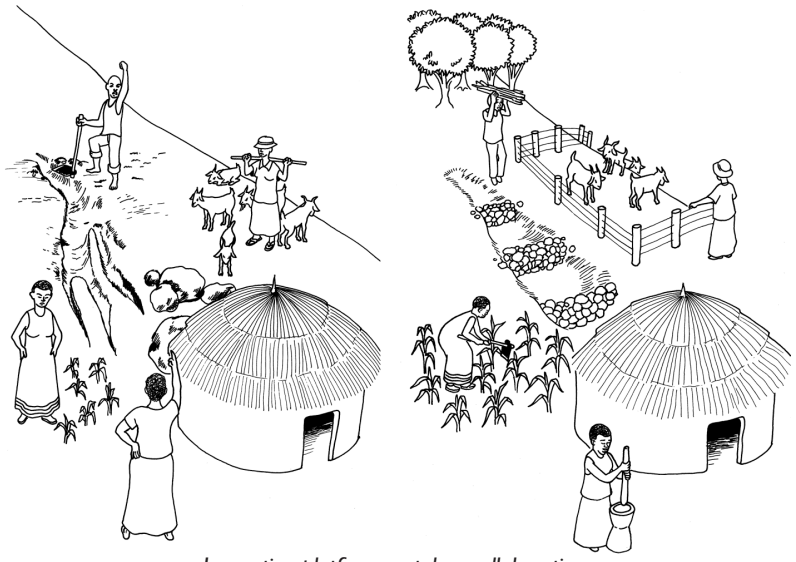
The platforms manage the testing and promotion of promising varieties and practices. Initiatives cover conservation agriculture, seed, equipment, livestock, cover crops and trees. In the short-term and at the farm level, these aim to improve the amount of inputs and knowledge that farmers have, reduce their costs and labour needs, and increase their incomes. That should lead to longer term benefits for the landscape as a whole: better yields, less environmental degradation and communal harmony.

More: http://simlesa.cimmyt.org

Benefits of innovation platforms

There are two traditional ways to deal with natural resource management issues: organize individual farmers and communities, or impose a solution from outside. Both are unsatisfactory: the first fails to bring in outside resources the community needs. The latter fails to consult adequately with local people. Innovation platforms can avoid these problems by bringing local stakeholders together with outsiders. This has various benefits.

Common vision. Innovation platforms bring together stakeholders with an interest in the natural resources of a particular area: groups and organizations such as farmers, herders, foresters, research, extension, local authorities, conservation officials, engineers and water-resources managers. By bringing them into a single forum, innovation platforms can make it possible to find common ground and develop a joint vision for improvements. Platform members analyse the problems, identify potential solutions, and put the chosen solutions into effect.



Innovation platforms catalyse collaboration

Coordinating local activities. The platform makes it possible to coordinate activities across levels. The community representatives gather ideas from their fellow villagers and voice their opinions on the platform. Once agreement on interventions has been reached, they seek commitment from the community and organize the implementation. The other platform members contribute skills and expertise, provide funding and equipment, and press for policy changes.

Additional expertise. If necessary, the platform can be expanded to include groups who at first sight are not obviously involved in natural resources, but who may nevertheless have an influence on them: traders, processors, financial services, input suppliers and so on. Membership of the platform can be adjusted as required to include such people.

Multiple levels. Natural resource issues often span multiple levels: a particular farming practice (such as ploughing) has effects on the broader landscape or watershed (in the form of erosion) and vice-versa. A landscape-level issue (such as erosion upslope) affects individual farms at the bottom of a hill. The problem has to be tackled at both levels simultaneously. By bringing together actors from these levels, innovation platforms make this possible. The SIMLESA project (Case 1) is an example of this.

Different entry points. Because it has a broad range of members, an innovation platform can identify solutions that lie outside the traditional field of natural resource management. The range of potential entry points is wide. Some examples: improving the marketing of produce may make growing crops more profitable. This encourages farmers to conserve the soil so they can grow more, and gives them the financial wherewithal to do so. Making microfinance available can give farmers the capital they need to make investments in soil fertility.

Representing local interests. Powerful government bodies often ignore local concerns. Innovation platforms can ensure a vehicle for farmers and other local stakeholders to voice their opinions and press for changes in policies (Case 2).

Case 2. Sidiky Coulibaly's flooded field

Sidiky Coulibaly watched the water rise slowly but surely in his field. His rice crop was drowning in water overflowing from the neighbouring irrigation canal. The canal was blocked by silt, but the irrigation authority refused to clear it. It was the villagers' responsibility.

The village chief asked an innovation platform that was operating in the village to intervene. This platform was one of several run by the Convergence of Sciences–Strengthening of Innovation Systems program in Mali. It included farmers' representatives as well as staff of the irrigation authority. It discovered that the rules were indeed unclear—but that the local irrigation bureau did not even have a copy of the agreement governing maintenance of the irrigation scheme.

Getting a response from the irrigation authority would take too long, so the platform helped the villagers organize a gang of workers to clear the blockage. Meanwhile, the platform is working with the irrigation authority to revise the rules and to make them accessible in the local language.

More: Nederlof and Pyburn (2012).

Scaling up and out. Innovation platforms in different locations can generate, test and implement local solutions to local problems. Linking them together enables them to share ideas and learn from one another. Mechanisms include field days, cross-visits, video, posters and training sessions. Linking local level platforms with a national level platform can make it possible for innovations developed in one place to influence policies and recommendations, so have a nationwide impact (Brief 9).

Innovation platform challenges

Innovation platforms are not a panacea for natural resource management issues.

- They require competent but neutral facilitation, which is usually difficult to guarantee (Brief 10).
- Resources are often sourced from outside, which keeps the balance of power against local people.
- A strong, self-organizing local entity is vital to sustain gains from innovation platforms, but such organizations are rare.
- There are often no clear incentives for farmers to be involved. This contrasts with innovation platforms on value chains (Brief 6), which have clear financial incentives.
- Natural resource issues often entail big power differences among the actors. More powerful actors may use platforms to coerce farmers to adopt a particular set of practices (Brief 4).

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November 2013

Impact of innovation platforms

"Innovation platforms are the new way to do development. Bringing different people together to jointly deal with problems avoids scientists developing solutions to problems that don't exist. Many bottlenecks to development are about people – unless we use people-centred approaches we won't overcome the bottlenecks"

"Not another innovation platform. Innovation platforms are a complete waste of time. All you guys do is endlessly talk to one another. Where is the action? What have you achieved"?

These are two perspectives familiar to people working with innovation platforms. In the complex web of relationships that surround agricultural development, innovation platforms are a good way to get to the root of problems and can bring about real, durable change for many people.

But showing their impact is tricky: their costs are high early on and effects may be slow in coming, hidden under the surface, and hard to predict, measure and attribute. However, the complexity of farming systems and food security leads to the question: can we really afford to ignore apparently costly approaches such as innovation platforms just because they're challenging?

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Key questions

Innovation platforms have become a popular way to stimulate positive change in smallholder agriculture. In principle, they bring together a range of stakeholders to identify and solve common problems. They ensure that different interests are taken into account, that stakeholders together work out solutions (brief 1).

In practice, we discover hard truths and difficult questions: Is it worth all the effort and resources? Is our context fit for innovation platforms? What is emerging from our efforts? Are we seeing income benefits to poor farmers? Are we seeing any changes in the way decision makers think, non-governmental organisations talk or farmers operate? If changes are occurring how do we measure them? Indeed, what do we measure? What hard evidence do we have that things are working?

Coping with complexity

Given the difficulties knowing whether innovation platforms work and whether they represent value for money, most people prefer to stick with 'business as usual'. The old approaches of promoting promising technologies, using demonstration plots and training farmers seem like good ideas.

However rural agricultural systems are complex, involve many different people and perspectives and may require complex approaches to dealing with bottlenecks. Business as usual is tantalizingly simple, but it does not address the very real complexity of how agricultural systems function.

Innovation platforms can deal with this complexity since they bring the right people together and avoid blind alleys or inappropriate interventions. People identifying their own issues and designing their own solutions are much more likely to follow through and make changes than if all this comes from outside.

Value for money

Innovation platforms are really worthwhile when they provide value for money. But what do we mean by value? In a platform designed to support market development, the platform is worthwhile if value chain actors, especially poor producers, earn more money through its actions. In platforms dealing with environmental issues, the value is less obvious to point to – it could be a healthier natural environment which eventually brings better income. But these benefits are thinly spread and only become obvious over long time scales.

For innovation platforms dealing with national policy issues, value is also difficult to pin down. How do we track the effects of a platform through changes in policy or regulations, changes in behaviour of people and on to benefits for farmers? How do we measure the value of these changes relative to the costs of running a platform? How can we be sure these changes are due to the platform?

Difficulties demonstrating value for money can lead to platforms being dismissed out of hand. But, just because value for money is difficult to measure, it doesn't mean the value is not there. We need to experiment with ways to monitor impact to answer these questions.

Case 1. Benefits for poor goat keepers

The LiLi-Markets project in Mozambique (run by the Institute of Agriculture Research of Mozambique, ICRISAT and ILRI) established innovation platforms to link farmers to livestock markets in Chicualacuala and Changara districts.

The innovation platform members highlighted the dire need for an abattoir in Chicualacuala and basic market infrastructure in Changara. In Chicualacuala over 80 cattle were slaughtered under trees every month. Without proper processing and cooling, huge losses were incurred when the meat was transported to Maputo. Meanwhile, the rudimentary market infrastructure in Changara resulted in serious stress and losses to the 100 cattle and 500 small stock sold each month.

The platform members presented these issues and the potential benefits to donors and development agencies. As a result, the Food and Agriculture Organization provided USD 35,000 to construct an abattoir in Chicualacuala. In Changara, the Ministry of Agriculture contributed USD 70,000 to build a new market. Sale of goats by poor livestock keepers has now become a firmly established market channel with strong livelihood benefits to many farmers.

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How do platforms achieve impacts?

Innovation platforms achieve impacts in four ways:

By providing information and resources to platform members. Sometimes the solution to a problem is obvious (at least to a specialist), but the people involved are not able to put it into effect. Much of the work of innovation platforms is to identify such issues, find ready-made solutions, and channel information and resources to those who need them. The innovation platform makes this process more efficient by bringing all the various actors together to solve the problem.

Example: Farmers complain about a pest attacking their crop. An extension specialist gets a photograph of the pest, contacts a researcher, who identifies the pest and says how to control it. The extensionist passes this on to the farmers. A seed company (also a platform member) supplies seed of a resistant variety and a microfinance institution offers loans to help the farmers buy it.

Through research. Sometimes the answer to a problem is not obvious. Research is needed. The innovation platform identifies the most important issues, selects promising ways to solve them, and tests these. It monitors the results and provides information to the members who need it.

This differs from standard research in two important ways. The research is often participatory with farmers heavily involved (even in charge of the process). It also involves other platform members. It thus draws on all their skills and expertise.

Example: Farmers complain about a pest attacking their crop. Platform members do not have a ready-made solution, so they conduct trials in farmers' fields. These identify a couple of resistant varieties, which the seed company multiplies and distributes.

By negotiation and persuasion. The solution may require several groups and organizations to change their behaviour. The innovation platform acts as a negotiating platform where members can agree on a compromise acceptable to all.

Example: Farmers say they cannot sell their goats. Traders say there are not enough goats. The abattoir says they are of poor quality. The groups agree that farmers will invest in feed and veterinary care if they get a guaranteed price; the abattoir offers them credit so they can buy inputs; the traders agree to pay a fixed price and pick up the goats at a collection point on a particular day.

Through lobbying and advocacy. Here, the target for change is a third party, such as a supermarket or government. The platform gathers evidence of the problem and evidence that it can be solved. Using this, it lobbies for changes.

Example: A large number of goats were slaughtered in unhygienic conditions to meet local demand for meat. The innovation platform persuaded a donor to construct an abattoir, and lobbied the authorities to build a market to handle the trade in live animals (see Case 1).

These methods are not mutually exclusive: the impacts of an innovation platform are likely to result from a combination of these and other mechanisms.

Why is demonstrating impact hard?

Despite the potential of innovation platforms, it can be hard to demonstrate their impacts. Why is this?

Achieving impact is difficult. The problems that innovation platforms attempt to solve tend to be complex. They tend to involve divergent interests, conflict and uncertainty. Finding a solution may take a long time: research may take several years, and persuading a government ministry to change a policy can take even longer.

Impacts are also hard to measure. Many impacts of innovation platforms, such as 'innovation capacity' are intangible and hard to quantify. There is often a time lag between a platform's activities and its impact and many actors are involved, each perhaps claiming success and making attribution difficult. It is also hard to separate out the effects of a platform: has farmers' income been increased by the platform or by something else?

Measuring benefits is tricky. Many benefits are unforeseen or are side benefits difficult to grasp. Thus, the many interactions stimulated by a platform may develop 'innovation capacity' among members in which they are better able to deal with new changes and find innovative solutions. Platform members may improve their ability to think critically as a result of their participation. Getting people together to discuss key issues can improve communication and build relationships which lead to innovation. These side benefits are difficult to measure (brief 5).

Innovation platforms are hard work, but their promises are also a long-term endeavour. They are often set up and run as part of three or four year projects but sometimes don't bear fruit for 8-10 years. And sometimes the benefits are different to what was expected and are seen in different places to those originally targeted. All this makes short-term assessment of impact challenging.

In assessing the impact of platforms we need to focus in the short term on assessment of changes in behaviour of those involved and leave the longer term, more tangible beneficiary benefits for later impact assessments. We need to accept that short-term impact on beneficiaries may be limited but that the behavioural changes arising from innovation platforms have potential for much larger impacts in the long term.

No recipes for success

Criticizing innovation platforms for lack of impact is common. Many development professionals seek silver bullet approaches and find innovation platforms too cumbersome. However, sticking to technical issues that can be solved with technical research misses some of the key bottlenecks to development – those associated with the people and organizations at the heart of agricultural systems. There is a danger that innovation platforms are discredited before we have the evidence for their usefulness.

Innovation platforms are sometimes presented as a panacea – the solution to all our problems. But replicating innovation platforms is difficult. There are no blueprints, recipes or silver bullets. Each innovation platform is different, operates in a unique context and involves a particular set of people. Dismissing them because they are just talk shops is not sensible until we have worked out their long term impact. We need to manage expectations and not be overly influenced by those demanding quick fixes.

Case 2. Changing water policies in Ethiopia

Traditional water supply schemes in Ethiopia serve a single use: domestic, livestock or irrigation. A learning and practice alliance (a type of innovation platform) in Goro Gutu commissioned research that showed that multiple-use schemes that serve all three needs were better value for money. The district water office now incorporates multiple uses into the planning of all new schemes in the district.

This research was presented at a national level platform run by RiPPLE, a water supply and sanitation project. Along with advocacy efforts by RiPPLE and non-government organizations, this encouraged policy-makers to recognize multiple-use services as a service delivery approach in the national sector plan. The officials said that the research findings were credible in part thanks to the local platform process. This involved government staff and other stakeholders setting the questions, taking part in data collection, and validating results. They also said it was important that experienced researchers provided quality control.

More: www.rippleethiopia.org

Innovation platforms are widely used in agricultural research to connect different stakeholders to achieve common goals. This is one of a series of briefs to help guide the design and implementation of innovation platforms. A contribution to the CGIAR Humidtropics research program, the development of the briefs was led by the International Livestock Research Institute; the briefs draw on experiences of the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food, several CGIAR centres and partner organizations.

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 November 2013