

NOTE 1: Innovation Platforms

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There is plenty of information available in the public domain that covers various aspects of extension and know-how about new methodologies for implementation. However this information is often scattered and presented in complex academic language. Hence practitioners, who often have very limited time and/or may only have basic formal education, find it difficult to make use of this information.

The Global Good Practices Initiative aims to bridge this gap by providing information about extension approaches and methods in easy-to-understand formats. As part of this effort, it makes "Good Practice Notes" available to all on a downloadable website. This Note contains one of the extension methods included in this series.

Introduction

Farmers, agri-business and service providers have to innovate continuously to adapt to an ever-changing environment (including markets, climate and resources). Innovation is about putting ideas that are new to a certain location into practice, and in this way changing the situation of those living in this area for the better. These "ideas" can be a new way of irrigating a field (i.e. a technology), a new way of organizing women farmers to bulk their produce (i.e. an organizational innovation), or a new policy that supports smallholders in getting bank loans (i.e. an institutional innovation). In agriculture, innovation often involves a combination of these different types of changes. For example: a new way of diverting water to fields requires that the farmers organize themselves in water use associations, which must in turn be supported by the local authorities.

Innovation is stimulated when multiple actors (farmers, NGOs, service providers, traders, agro-dealers, researchers, policy makers) interact and share their ideas, knowledge and opinions to come up with new solutions. Innovation platforms can be used by advisory services and other actors as a means to bring different actors together to discuss and negotiate collective or coordinated action.

Philosophy and principles

Innovation platforms are made up of various actors who communicate, co-operate and share tasks to carry out activities needed for innovation to take place¹.

There are a few principles that are important:

- Diverse composition of stakeholders.

- Address a shared problem or opportunity, not the agenda of one or two members only.
- Facilitation by a neutral person/organisation with convening authority.
- Initial success motivates the members to commit to the platform.
- Change resulting from the innovation should benefit multiple members.
- Exchange and learning should remain central.
- Platform members must show respect to each other despite of diverging opinions and knowledge.
- Systems for ensuring transparency and accountability must be in place.

Platforms can exist at multiple levels. Local platforms, for example, tend to address specific problems or opportunities such as improving the efficiency of a specific value chain. Local platforms are well placed to test new ideas and generate action on the ground. Platforms at national or regional levels often set the agenda for agricultural development, and allow stakeholders, including farmers through their representatives, to influence policies (see Case 1). Linking platforms at different levels offer several benefits such as: sharing successful ideas, empowering local actors to influence policy, fostering dialogue in policy making, developing value chains, and increasing legitimacy and learning².

Implementation

A lot can be said about how innovation platforms are set-up and put into motion. We organize the information in "steps". Needless to say, these steps are a simplification of reality and aimed only to help readers understand the basic dynamics around innovation platforms⁴.

¹ Nederlof ES, Wongtschowski M, Lee F van der. 2011. *Putting heads together: Agricultural innovation platforms in practice*. KIT publishers, Amsterdam

² Tucker J, Schut M, Klerkx L. 2013. Linking action at different levels through innovation platforms. *Innovation Platforms Practice Brief 9*. ILRI. <http://cgspace.cgiar.org/bitstream/handle/10568/34163/Brief9.pdf?sequence=1>



CASE 1

The Ghana Oil Palm platform was set up in the context of the Convergence of Sciences-Strengthening of Innovation Systems program in Ghana, to address problems related to processing oil palm into cooking oil, soaps, cosmetics and biofuel. The platform (called a Concertation action and Innovation Group - CIG), was formed at national level but operates largely in Kwaebibrim district, one of Ghana's main oil palm-growing areas. Linked to the platform are two local platforms which aim to support small-scale processors in improving their output for export and for industrial markets: (1) An experimentation group that tests processing practices and (2) A district-level stakeholder group, which sets the agenda for experiments; and plays an important role in lobbying the district administration³.

1. Ask yourself: is an innovation platform the best tool?

Consider the costs to be incurred, the issues at stake (i.e. do you want to disseminate an idea or to solve a problem? - the former can probably be done in much cheaper ways), and whether platform members are willing to work together (see Case 2). If an innovation platform looks right to you, then define your (general!) topic or theme, and at what level the platform should operate, e.g. district level, provincial level, or national level.

2. Look at what is already in place - do not start from scratch if not needed. Build on previous partnerships and initiatives. Ask potential partners which initiatives they have been involved in, and whether the innovation platform will add value to on-going initiatives. (Re-)consider, on that basis, whether a new innovation platform is really the best tool to use - or if existing multi-stakeholder structures could be used instead.

Recommended tools: interviews with key partners, stakeholder analysis. Materials found at: <http://www.wageningenportals.nl/msp/tools>

3. Identify potential platform members: This step can be done either in a meeting with several initiators, or prior to that. It includes:

- Identify which actors (individuals, partner organizations, etc.) would add value to the platform. Do not limit the choice to like-minded partners or usual suspects; but do realize that the agenda needs to move forward quickly (i.e. not be dragged by endless discussions with actors unwilling to cooperate).

- Select the most appropriate actors and secure their active involvement by discussing with them, prior to the meeting, about their interest and concerns.

Recommended tools: stakeholder analysis, interviews with key partners. Materials found at: <http://www.wageningenportals.nl/msp/tools>

4. Jointly develop an action plan: this step is best done in a meeting/workshop; but can be prepared by discussing with key actors - and marginal actors likely to be excluded from the discussion, such as women farmers - beforehand. It includes:

- Define main concerns and opportunities the platform could focus on.
- Prioritise these - focus on a few, concrete, and tangible issues; for which there is energy and enthusiasm in the group.
- Define a few concrete activities, and define who is responsible for making those happen, by when. One way to define activities is to let actors themselves say what they want to do, or be responsible to do, to help solving a certain problem.

Recommended tools: action planning, ranking of priorities. Materials found at: http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/outreach_actionplanning_guide.pdf

5. Define roles and responsibilities: in a meeting, define the platform's governance structure and the general division of responsibilities (see section on governance below).

Recommended tools: open discussion at meeting. Materials found at: <http://thepartneringinitiative.org/w/resources/toolbook-series/the-partnering-toolbook/>

CASE 2

In Tanzania, the Research Into Use (RIU) programme selected indigenous chicken as its main focus because it requires minimum resources for investment, is kept by both men and women of all ages, is less dependent on agricultural seasons and provides quick returns throughout the year. A private advisory services company - MUVEK Development Solutions Ltd - was hired by the RIU programme to co-ordinate the initiative. Though the intention was to establish an innovation platform, initial difficulties in getting partners to work together led MUVEK to change its strategy. Instead, it moved towards acting as a broker of bilateral contacts and interaction in what they found to be a more flexible and efficient set-up⁵.

³ Nederlof, E.S. and Pyburn, R. 2012. *One finger cannot lift a rock. Facilitating innovation platforms to trigger institutional change in West Africa*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.

⁴ This section draws on: Tennyson R. 2005. *The Partnering Toolbook*. Published by GAIN, IBLF and UNDP, London. Critchley W, Verburg M, Veldhuizen L van. (Eds.) 2006. *Facilitating multi-stakeholder partnerships: Lessons from Prolinnova*. Silang, Cavite, Philippines: IIRR/Leusden, ETC.

⁵ Nederlof ES, Wongschowski M, Lee F van der. 2011. *Putting heads together: Agricultural innovation platforms in practice*. KIT publishers, Amsterdam

6. **Keep partners engaged:** a common challenge of innovation platforms, as partners may stop coming to the meetings after a few initial well-attended gatherings. A few tips:

- Commitment grows from successful first actions: the earlier platform members start seeing benefits of the platform, the better.
- Choose the “right” individuals to participate; those preferably not sitting too “high” in an organization hierarchy (and who will probably not have the time to attend the platform’s meetings) nor too “low” (with little or no decision making power, frustrating him/herself and others by taking too long to make things happen).
- Task the facilitator to make an additional effort to engage those who may not be at ease to speak out at meetings, such as women farmers.

7. **Revisit, re-plan:** a platform may start with a specific problem. Once this is solved, it needs to move on. Re-planning is therefore an important step, to be taken often. It involves:

- Check how far you are in solving the problem (or taking full advantage of an opportunity) prioritised. What has gone right so far? What hasn’t? What could we learn from that?
- Discuss whether it is time to choose other topics, and go again through a process of prioritisation and action planning.

8. **Plan for the long term:** often, innovation platforms start up as part of a project. What happens after the project ends? It is important to say that a platform has its existence justified only if it continues to catalyse positive action. So once that positive action ends, the platform may as well be dissolved. If the platform partners intend to continue working together, they have to make agreements - as early in the process as possible - on how the functioning costs of the platform (meeting venues, broker, implementation of activities) will be covered.

Governance and management

The existence of a well-working coordination body (core group, board or committee) which is accountable towards platform members (and donors where present) makes the innovation platform more transparent and trustworthy. These can be rotating functions, so to allow actors to change roles throughout the process.

Platform members need to be kept up-to-date, and they need to know what other members do. This is a challenge when activity implementation is in the hands of many individuals/organizations. It can be improved through the following activities:

- Making sure platform members feel part of planning, implementation and discussion of achievements.
- Holding regular meeting in which partners report on their activities. There is a risk of overburdening the

platform members, so keep it simple and pragmatic. Asking platform members to write reports every month is simply not realistic.

- Circulating information through e-mail/text messages, visits to platform members.
- Organizing a meeting with platform members’ managers once in a while (if appropriate).
- Organizing joint field days to see what other platform members are doing.

POWER ISSUES

Platform members have different interests and different means to exercise influence and power. Marginal groups are easily overlooked, and it requires effort to make innovation platforms socially inclusive. Facilitators need to mediate between the different interests, and in some cases may need to advocate on behalf of less powerful members. Participatory videos, role playing, and meetings in informal spaces can be effective ways to deal with power issues⁶.

Capacities required of providers and participants

A key factor of success for innovation platform is that of good facilitation. The facilitator (sometimes called “innovation broker”) needs to have some degree of neutrality. The facilitator can be an individual or an organisation; from either a research organization, an NGO, an advisory service provider, a farmer. S/he should be knowledgeable of the concerned topic or theme addressed, and should have convening power to bring stakeholders together. The facilitator also needs to have the right attitude: being patient and culturally sensitive, open-minded, and empathic⁷.

Costs

The costs of an innovation platform vary greatly. The operational costs can range between zero to several thousands of dollars per year. Platform members also incur costs; all members have to commit time to the meetings and activities of the innovation platform. Costs to consider for sustaining an innovation platform are:

- Facilitator (salary or at least payment for incurred expenses such as travel)
- Venue and refreshments for meetings
- Travel costs of participants
- Per diems for participants to attend meetings (only if strictly required as this can create wrong incentives)
- Communication costs (e.g. phone bills, printing)
- Funds for experiments with new ideas

In principle, there is a good argument for public funds to be used to support start-up of platforms, provided that some co-funding (in cash or kind) from other stakeholders are in place.

⁶ Cullen B, Tucker J, Hommann-Kee Tui S. 2013. Power dynamics and representation in innovation platforms. *Innovation Platforms Practice Brief 4*. ILRI. <http://cgspace.cgiar.org/bitstream/handle/10568/34166/Brief4.pdf?sequence=1>

⁷ Heemskerk W, Klerkx L, Sitima J. 2011. Brokering innovation. In: Nederlof et al. (Eds). *Putting heads together: Agricultural innovation platforms in practice*. Bulletin 396. KIT Publishers. Pp 43-54



STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strengths

- Tackles institutional issues (e.g. difficulty to collaborate between organisations, policies, negative attitudes towards other actors)
- Strengthens capacity to innovate (adapt to change) of actors involved, which will remain after/if the platform ceases to exist
- Allows actors that are often ignored to speak up, if well facilitated
- Allows solving of problems where solutions depend on many actors acting together
- Dynamic: may change over time, and so remain relevant

Weaknesses

- Often takes time, will not lead to substantial change in a few months' time
- Not adequate for pure technology dissemination
- Risk having meetings turn into "talk shops;" Needs to be steered towards action
- Depends on well-trained facilitators
- Difficult to deal with actors that are fierce competitors
- Unpredictable: difficult to promise deliverables to donors, because these depend on the interest and capacity of the platform members which change over time

Potential impact

Innovation platforms will not lead to immediate and direct impact as such, as their contribution is supporting people to talk to each other and to act together towards putting new ideas and solutions into practice. Often, the benefits from working with innovation platforms are found elsewhere than originally planned, because of their dynamic nature. The main potential of innovation platforms is to achieve changes in the behaviour of the platform members, which has the potential of achieving large tangible impacts in the long term⁸. Innovation platforms are not an appropriate mechanism to disseminate new technologies or practices at scale.

Training materials

Centre for Development Innovation. Knowledge co-creation portal: Multi-stakeholder processes. Tools at: <http://www.wageningenportals.nl/msp/tools>

Ramsar CEPA. A Guide to Participatory Action Planning and Techniques for Facilitating Groups: Supporting people taking action for the wise use of wetlands and other natural resources through an integrated approach to planning communication, education, participation and awareness raising. Page 77-85

http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/outreach_actionplanning_guide.pdf

Tennyson, R. 2003. The Partnering Toolbook. The International Business Leaders Forum (IBLF) and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN).

<http://thepartneringinitiative.org/w/resources/toolbook-series/the-partnering-toolbook/>

Further reading

Misiko, M; Mundy, P and Ericksen, P. 2013. Innovation platforms to support natural resource management. Innovation platforms practice brief 11, ILRI, Nairobi.

Nederlof, E.S. and Pyburn, R. 2012. One finger cannot lift a rock. Facilitating innovation platforms to trigger institutional change in West Africa. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute.

http://www.kit.nl/sed/wp-content/uploads/publications/1987_One%20finger%20web.pdf

Rooyen A van, Swaans K, Cullen B, Lema Z, Mundy P. 2013. Facilitating innovation platforms. Innovation Platforms Practice Brief 10. ILRI.

<http://cgspace.cgiar.org/bitstream/handle/10568/34164/Brief10.pdf?sequence=1>

Tennyson, R. 2005. The brokering guidebook: Navigating effective sustainable development partnerships. International Business Leaders Forum, London.

<http://thepartneringinitiative.org/w/resources/toolbook-series/the-brokering-guidebook/>

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⁸ Duncan, A.J., Le Borgne, E., Maute, F. and Tucker, J. 2013. Impact of innovation platforms. Innovation Platforms Practice Brief 12. Nairobi, Kenya: ILRI.