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THE RESTRUCTURING OF

EAST WEST SEED

ERASTO NGOLE'S

BEGINNING OF AN AMAZING JOURNEY

**TAHA'S POLICY &
ADVOCACY BRIEF**

**SUMMARY OF KEY POLICY &
ADVOCACY ACHIEVEMENTS**

The sustainability and success of Innovation Platforms

By Marc Schut

Innovation platforms are fast becoming part of the mantra of agricultural research for development (AR4D) projects and programs. They have become an increasingly popular approach to enhancing multi-stakeholder collaboration in AR4D. Their basic tenet is that stakeholders in the agricultural sector (farmers, government, private sector) depend on one another to solve their problems, and hence need a space where they can learn, negotiate, and coordinate to overcome challenges and capture opportunities through a facilitated innovation process. It is however very important to look at innovation platforms critically in defining their features, key functions, and what they can and, as importantly, cannot do.

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Innovation platform testing and disseminating improved vegetable varieties and production practices in Sagara village, Babati District, Manyara Region in Tanzania.

Photo: Hassan Mdinga, WorldVeg

In essence, innovation platforms facilitate interaction and collaboration within and between networks of farmers, governmental and non-governmental service providers, policymakers, researchers, private sector players, and other stakeholders in the agricultural system. An important question for development donors and funders of innovation platforms is the extent to which innovation platforms and their outcomes are sustainable. The sustainability issue requires us to consider the following two questions:

- ❑ When can innovation platforms be considered successful?
- ❑ How can innovation platforms be embedded in different governance, cultural and political contexts?

When can innovation platforms be considered successful?

Successful innovation platforms should not be sustained indefinitely and are temporary organizational structures. An innovation platform may cease to exist when it has addressed the initially identified challenge. It is thus no longer worth the investment – its contribution to innovation ceases to be significant or there are no funding sources available to support continuation. The three dimensions of sustainability should be carefully distinguished as follows:

- ❑ Sustainability of the changes that happened through the platform (the innovations);
- ❑ Sustainability of the innovation platform itself as a mechanism, niche, or entity for change and collective action;
- ❑ Sustainability of stakeholders' capacity to innovate

Whereas, the first relates to the outcomes desired and attained by an innovation platform, the second is a measure of organizational sustainability while the third relates to institutionalization of the innovation process, as tested by the platform, diffused through

changes in conventional wisdom and practices, that lead to enhanced capacity within innovation systems.

How can innovation platforms be embedded in different governance, cultural, and political contexts?

Innovation platforms are by nature democratic spaces for joint problem identification, analysis, prioritization, and the collective design and implementation of activities to overcome problems. They are part of agricultural systems, and only a very small number of the stakeholders will be represented in the innovation platforms. Many value chains and service providers are active in agricultural systems, and innovation platforms often function around a specific niche in the agricultural system in a specific geographical location (e.g. production of vegetables in Arusha for export).

These agricultural systems form part of broader livelihood systems such as agriculture, healthcare, education, industry and infrastructure. The socio-political systems govern the rules of the game, including not only formal policies, agreements and standards, but also informal norms and values related to the importance of agriculture in society.

The implication is that an initiative to set up an innovation platform can draw unexpected responses from stakeholders in the systems within which it operates. The innovation platform may, for example, attract support from high-powered stakeholders, such as politicians. This could be positive, as it increases the chances of success, but could it also put the innovation platform at risk of being co-opted by one particular interest? The establishment could consider the innovation platform as a subversive activity that threatens its power position. How does one decide to proceed if the initiating group still considers it 'the right thing to do'? Generally, innovation platforms with a broad stakeholder support base run a lower risk of being co-opted, or of being seen as subversive. A political economy analysis can help to elucidate the power dynamics at play in specific agricultural, livelihood, and socio-political systems.



Members of the Maputo, Mozambique best practice hub: an area for joint learning, experimentation and marketing of vegetables, using a value chain approach.

In most countries, such as Tanzania, it is considered positive that rural actors organize themselves, sit down together around joint constraints, and self-organize interventions to overcome these constraints. In other countries, such processes may be viewed with suspicion by governments or other dominant parties, who may feel that these platforms are not needed, or undermining their role, mandate and function. The bottom line here is that project designers and implementers need to think critically about how to support innovation platforms in the governance or socio-political context in which they are being implemented.

Members of the Maputo, Mozambique best practice hub: an area for joint learning, experimentation and marketing of vegetables, using a value chain approach (Photo: Hipolito Malia).

For the success and sustainability of innovation platforms, there are critical questions that should be asked and answered before deciding to embark on implementing one. These questions should include the following:

- ▣ What is the new innovation to be designed and tested (e.g. growing high-quality vegetables by unemployed youth in Arusha)?
- ▣ How can we tailor the innovation to specific types of farmers or agro-ecological areas (e.g. training and other needs specifically for youth)?
- ▣ How can the existing innovation be scaled, either through upscaling (e.g. have youth groups form dedicated market linkages with supermarkets or make them produce for export markets) or outscaling (e.g. making youth trainer-of-trainers

and entice them to share their knowledge and expand their groups)?

Overall, innovation platforms can fulfill an important function in the pathway leading to the scaling of agricultural innovations by bringing together different groups of stakeholders that all contribute to analyzing a complex problem or challenge. In that sense, they all bring a piece of the puzzle needed to overcome the problem. During the process of jointly analyzing problems, stakeholders become aware of how their problems are interrelated and how joint action is needed to address them. This is an important prerequisite for achieving impact at scale; realizing the needs and interests of different stakeholder groups and ensuring that the innovations developed are not only technically sound, but also affordable for farmers, and coherent with government policies and objectives.

It is important for not only farmers, but also for policymakers and the private sector to be a part of the decision-making and innovation processes - a precondition for supporting the wider use and spread of validated technologies and other types of innovations developed in innovation platforms. The process and its participants provide legitimacy to the outputs for key scaling actors in upper levels

of agricultural innovation systems, as these outputs are developed in a familiar location known and related to the key scaling actors. This goes to show that innovation platforms – through their inclusive, demand-driven, and participatory action research methods – can provide an important basis for impactful innovation processes.

For more information:

Schut, M., Andersson, J.A., Dror, I., Kamanda, J., Sartas, M., Mur, R., Kassam, S., Brouwer, H., Stoian, D., Devaux, A., Velasco, C., Gramzow, A., Dubois, T., Flor, R.J., Gummert, M., Buizer, D., McDougall, C., Davis, K., Homann-Kee Tui, S., Lundy, M., 2017. Guidelines for Innovation Platforms in Agricultural Research for Development. Decision support for research, development and funding agencies on how to design, budget and implement impactful Innovation Platforms. International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) and Wageningen University (WUR) under the CGIAR Research Program on Roots Tubers and Bananas (RTB), Kigali, Rwanda. Available online: <http://www.rtb.cgiar.org/blog/publication/guidelines-innovation-platforms-agricultural-research-development/>.

'Best practice hubs': linking unemployed youth to lucrative vegetable markets

Best practice hubs are designed to address knowledge gaps among unemployed youth along the vegetable value chain and serve as centers for education, crop trials and experimentation. Training targets specific pre-identified market opportunities and is both technical as business-oriented; during 3-month training sessions, covering an entire growing season, youth is drawn into communities of practice, where they can learn, evaluate and adapt not only vegetable production technologies but also effective value chain analysis skills to support income-generating activities and build strong market relationships. BPHs are a model for bridging research practice by focusing interventions in targeted geographical areas, embedded within vegetable farming communities. Technologies have to be simple, affordable and available and include drip irrigation, cheap and locally available greenhouses and knowledge about seeds, fertilizers and biopesticides that are readily available. Young farmers were put in touch with markets, finance institutions and, most importantly, each other through an innovation platform. Such an approach was highly successful in Arusha, Tanzania where five youth groups were trained at a best practice hub, and linked with local supermarkets, such as Nakumatt and Soko Kuu Green Grocers Stalls Arusha, and export companies, such as HomeVeg and Serengeti Fresh. Some groups were able to produce vegetable crops according to production certification standards.