

Innovation Platforms for Agricultural Development

Evaluating the mature innovation
platforms landscape

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11 Are we there yet?

Some reflections on the state of innovation platforms in agricultural research for development

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Introduction

The previous chapter has linked together the underlying components of IPs with their performance. Using the eight case studies featured in this book as examples, we have identified how specific IPs have managed to make good use of their process, content and support functions in order to achieve impact at scale. However, it also highlighted that none of the platforms studied here had attained all three of the impacts expected from mature platforms: highlighting system trade-offs, generalizing activities to multiple commodities and reaching a large number of beneficiaries. This chapter presents the lessons learned by the case study authors for IPs to achieve impact. We also discuss areas of future research to identify the remaining factors that will lead IPs to deliver impact at scale.

In addition to the analysis based on the framework and matrices elaborated in the introduction and synthesis chapters, we also conducted interviews and facilitated exercises with all authors on what they considered to be the most important factors of success of IPs. This resulted in a common thread based on three complementing factors, namely *vision*, *enabling environment* and a *research for development orientation*. This concluding chapter will first provide a brief summary of each element, before proceeding to offer some final thoughts on the ‘landscape’ of mature IPs covered in this book, and some of the implications this holds for the future of IPs as a vehicle for agricultural development.

Success factors for IPs to achieve success

Vision

The first success factor that emerged was vision, or the fact that the IP should be clear about where it wants to go and how. To be successful, this vision should be embodied and encouraged by able leadership, which needs to be empowered and accountable for making sure that the IP focus of work ‘emerges’ from the commitment and common interest of participants rather than being ‘established’ through an external drive to tackle a problem.

In addition to able leadership, the group also identified skilful facilitation as another crucial element of the vision for IPs. The person facilitating the platform should be dedicated to this task and foster the participation of grass-roots actors from the bottom up, taking into account power dynamics. It is important for the facilitator to be physically present to participate regularly in platform activities as this helps foster trust between the platform members and between members and their facilitator.

Finally, the last component of vision is equity and transparency in the platform activities, whereby all actors in the platform are consulted in a similar way and all decisions taken have been discussed with the well-being of all actors in mind. Including equity and transparency in the platform vision helps strengthen the linkages between actors who are further motivated to participate.

Enabling environment

The second success factor of IPs involved in the case study competition was the enabling environment in which they thrived.

The first component of this enabling environment is the linkages with public policies. In some contexts, the coherence of the platform objectives with public policies has helped the platforms become essential to policy makers' engagement with grass-roots stakeholders for more relevant policy formulation and effective implementation. In other cases, IPs have supported the strengthening of public policies that were not appropriate to the local context by triggering the development of better policies. In line with coherence, some cases highlighted the importance of using already existing networks of stakeholders to foster innovations, rather than creating new platforms that duplicate work already being done in parallel multi-stakeholder groups.

The second component of an enabling environment for platforms is the willingness and capacity of members to participate in the innovation processes. This is achieved mainly through the skilful facilitation mentioned above and the search for right incentives, as discussed below. This involvement of all key stakeholders is particularly important for those who are likely to take action in order to reproduce successful innovations and disseminate them to other potential beneficiaries.

The third component of the enabling environment of IPs consists of the incentives that keep participants interested in contributing. These typically need to include short-term monetary incentives to attract and retain membership of smallholder farmers. However, a reachable mix of both short- and long-term expected benefits is more likely to sustain continuous motivation and participation from platform members.

Research for development orientation

The last success factor of the IPs reviewed in this compilation is the innovative science that the platform develops and trials. The application of applied science

to solve real-life concrete problems and the participatory nature of the research trials conducted with platform stakeholders creates a meaningful link between science and practice.

To achieve this useful link, applying science on a joint and concrete problem faced by the platform members is the starting point. It is also useful to prioritize the research activities that are likely to generate quick results; this will foster the interest of platform participants and provide incentives for their further participation, as highlighted above. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a useful approach to facilitating this type of embedded research for development.

The need for multifunctional IPs

Our synthesis demonstrated that none of the IPs featured in this compilation had attained all elements of impact at scale: systems trade-offs, application to multiple commodities and scaling of innovation (not to mention learning from failures). Therefore, we must ask why it is seemingly such an elusive task, and why platforms tend to gravitate towards a more narrow focus. Further research in this area, for example looking at the incentives and motivations of platform members, as well as their ability to manage multiple complex issues through a single entity would certainly be of interest in this context.

This section has fleshed out how the innovation process, innovation content, and support functions provided by IPs can lead to achieving impact in agricultural development. In the previous chapter, illustrative examples from the eight case studies featured in this compilation have demonstrated the links existing between these four elements of the theoretical framework, as proposed in the introductory chapter of this book. However, a closer look at the framework and its resulting impact matrix lead us to conclude that the three pillars identified by the theoretical framework (process, content and platform support functions), posited to lead to platform impact at scale, are prerequisite yet insufficient factors of success *at scale*. Yet, a definitive answer to what is the ‘secret sauce’ of IP success (if such even exists) will need to be the subject of further inquiries. Nevertheless, we can deduce the following conclusions.

Conclusion and final thoughts

As previously mentioned, we received no entries under the ‘learning from failures’ category. This in itself is a statement of sector immaturity, as it seems not to have embraced the approaches found in more mature sectors of owning up to failures and analysing to learn from both positive and negative lessons. A deeper look at the overall entries and cases published in this book further suggests that this is a trend that holds throughout. For example, we received only one entry on system trade-offs, and in the course of fleshing out the full case, its authors veered away from the core system trade-off elements to more generic productivity and process issues.

The two categories that had the bulk of the entries did not fully live up to what this process had targeted to showcase in terms of ‘pure’ entries in these categories. So for instance, multi-commodity cases were often a combination of crops, as opposed to the holistic crop–livestock–tree interactions that many researchers advocate. Likewise, the scaling cases were for the most part in the low thousands of direct outreach – not a small feat in some of the difficult environments where these platforms operate, but certainly not even a drop in the bucket when one thinks of the billions of farmers that large-scale initiatives aim to reach.

It is important to point out that useful elements emerged for each of these, even though they did not cut across the board – so while we see pockets of success, we still can’t celebrate success across the board, or at a ‘game-changer’ scale. This then leads us to some of the questions we end up with, and which if/when answered, could provide a lot more insight into the suitability of IPs for specific work in a specific context, to inform investment decisions and facilitate more efficient and effective work in these areas. Some of these include:

- Why is the landscape the way it is? Our findings suggest that although most platforms are ‘set up’, as opposed to ‘emerge’, the scope of their focus areas still tends to be rather narrow, and somewhat in disconnect with the very holistic objectives promoted by those who set these IPs up. Could this be linked to short project cycles, the desire to show quick results, focus on short-term financial incentives, or a narrow focus of anchor projects, with no capacity to integrate broader and sustainable incentives? One of the key lessons from this exercise is that there is a need to avoid narrow processes, which requires that IPs become multifunctional by embracing multi-dimensional processes.
- Are IPs the most appropriate instrument to foster agriculture development? As was demonstrated through many of the cases, IPs can certainly lead to impact and can be an effective vehicle for agricultural development. However, it seems that insufficient attention has gone into examining whether the *solutions* developed by IPs (as opposed to the process), are scalable and replicable. Certainly, there is much to be said about the need for a much better availability of data on, and analysis of, the comparative return on investment (financial and otherwise) of IP work compared to a range of other intervention strategies. We’ve seen little evidence of a sense of urgency among researchers and practitioners alike to come up with a rigorous framework for measuring and reporting on this – but we feel that the lack of such an evidence-based approach is casting a shadow on much of the good work that is being showcased (including through anecdotal evidence such as most of the work presented in this book). How can this be measured? Similar exercises to understand more cases are critical to generate a matrix to guide any prudent investments in scaling approaches.

- Finally, when analysing the cases and framework findings, we emerged with a sense that IPs can potentially be a potent ‘bridge’ between the local (‘small is beautiful’) approaches that embody much of the participatory, demand-driven and community-led initiatives, and those global ‘large scale impact’ technology-driven initiatives.
- To be that bridge though, and to assume an integrative role for IPs alongside other approaches for inclusive agricultural development in the broader agricultural innovation system, the conceptual frameworks as well as the many implementation cases need to take a more balanced approach. They need to take into account local innovations but filter them (and the investment therein) through a lens of suitability for larger scale replication, and also factor in all direct and indirect costs to produce a more hard-nosed analysis of benefits per dollar invested.