Multi-stakeholder Research-for-Development (R4D) platforms - an initiative for integrated farming towards sustainable intensification

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Introduction

One of the main challenges to agricultural development in Africa is to recognize and take advantage of heterogeneity, both in terms of socio-cultural variation and dynamics - which is apparent at the local level – and bio-physical diversity, providing drastically different growing conditions.

In Africa RISING, research-for-development (R4D) platforms is an approach to address these challenges of diversity and heterogeneity, while at the same time focus on smallholders' demands and the program's opportunity to have positive impact. The platforms serve as a vehicle for prioritizing and scaling of sustainable intensification through integrated farm practices, focusing on crop/livestock interactions at the farm and landscape levels, and also linking farmers to input dealers, markets, extension and policy. The ultimate goal is to stimulate learning and innovation to improve livelihoods in terms of productivity, income generation and nutrition.

The primary beneficiaries are small-scale farmers and other stakeholders in rural areas who, through the platforms, will have better access to information, technologies, expertise, credits, markets, etc., supporting agricultural intensification for improved and sustainable livelihoods. An important aim of the platform approach is that research outputs as well as outcomes of platform discussions/negotiations will inform decision makers, public and private players in agricultural development and educators about how the R4D platform can work to promote technological, social and institutional change, in order to put sustainable intensification to scale (Hillbur 2013b).
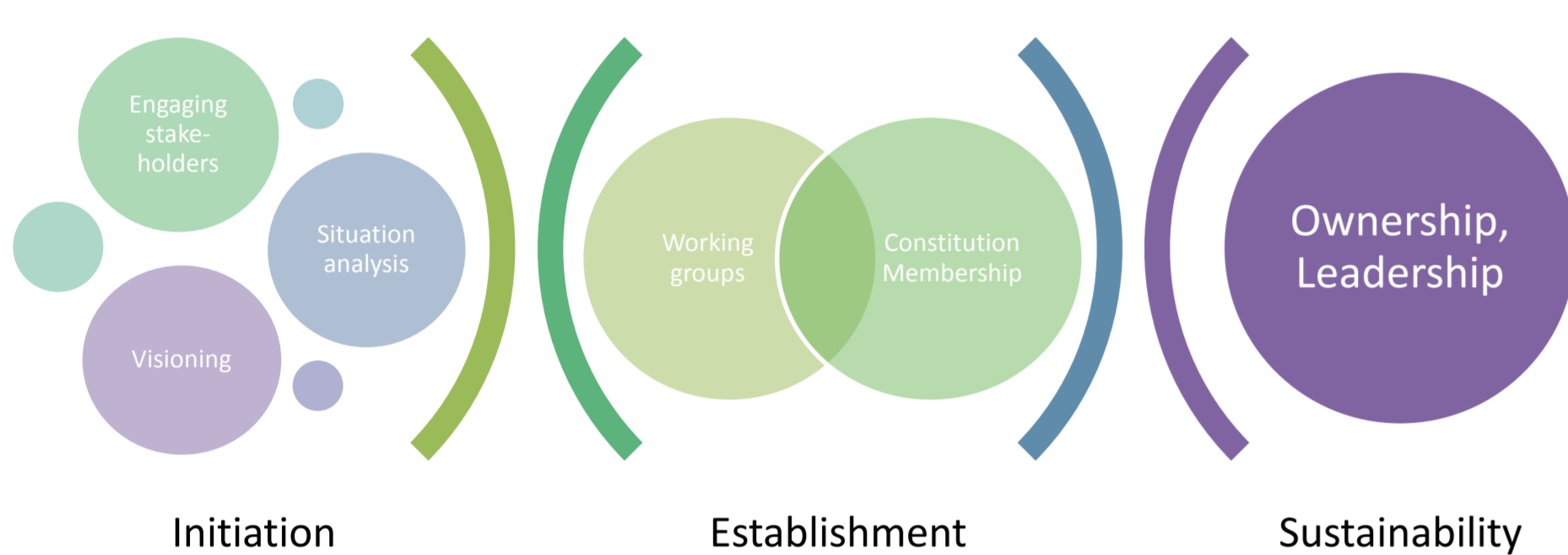

Figure 1. Major steps in the establishment process of a strategic level R4D platform. R4D platforms evolve through open-ended processes unique to each local situation

Why platforms?

There is a range of reasons why an R4D platform is applying a multi-stakeholder approach, related to the basic functions of research for development: First, research institutions need a demand-driven approach as a complement to more traditional, "science-driven", approaches. The second dimension of research for development is the targeting and effectiveness of development interventions. The third reason is that while research is normally a relatively small-scale activity (in terms of beneficiaries), development initiatives supporting good governance and market access must play the role of promotion of new ideas to a wider audience. Lastly, when these things are in place, the potential for platform sustainability beyond the project lifespan is increased.

R4D platforms link a range of organizational actors that can promote the simultaneous technological, social and institutional change needed for sustainable intensification (Hillbur 2013b). This may include a range of activities, but from a research point of view, the R4D platform responds to the establishment of three different communicative strategies: network building, social learning and conflict management (Leeuwis and Aarts 2011:31).

The Babati R4D Platform, Tanzania

Babati District in Tanzania is unique in its agro-ecological and socio-cultural diversity, represented by six Africa RISING project villages - Long, Sabilo, Seloto, Matufa, Hallu and Shaurimoyo.

In Babati, the R4D platform approach was not integrated in the research activities from the start. Until now, the R4D platform activities have been largely research-driven, such as feedback meetings with farmers and local communities, training sessions with stakeholders on particular technologies, etc. A possible role for the platforms here is as a hub for research coordination and capacity building, which would be helpful both for research and for the local community, including government interventions.

The interplay between research-driven activities and a demand-driven process led by the local communities is still a big challenge. An essential component for the future is to further involve private sector representatives and NGOs to stimulate the incentives for the local communities.

Furthermore, although Africa RISING is primarily a research program, the impact and potential scaling of introduced technologies as well as the well-being of different groups of beneficiaries is essential. This calls for a forum where research can be initiated based on collective learning, social interaction or straightforward needs of the local communities. The platforms should be able to address this.
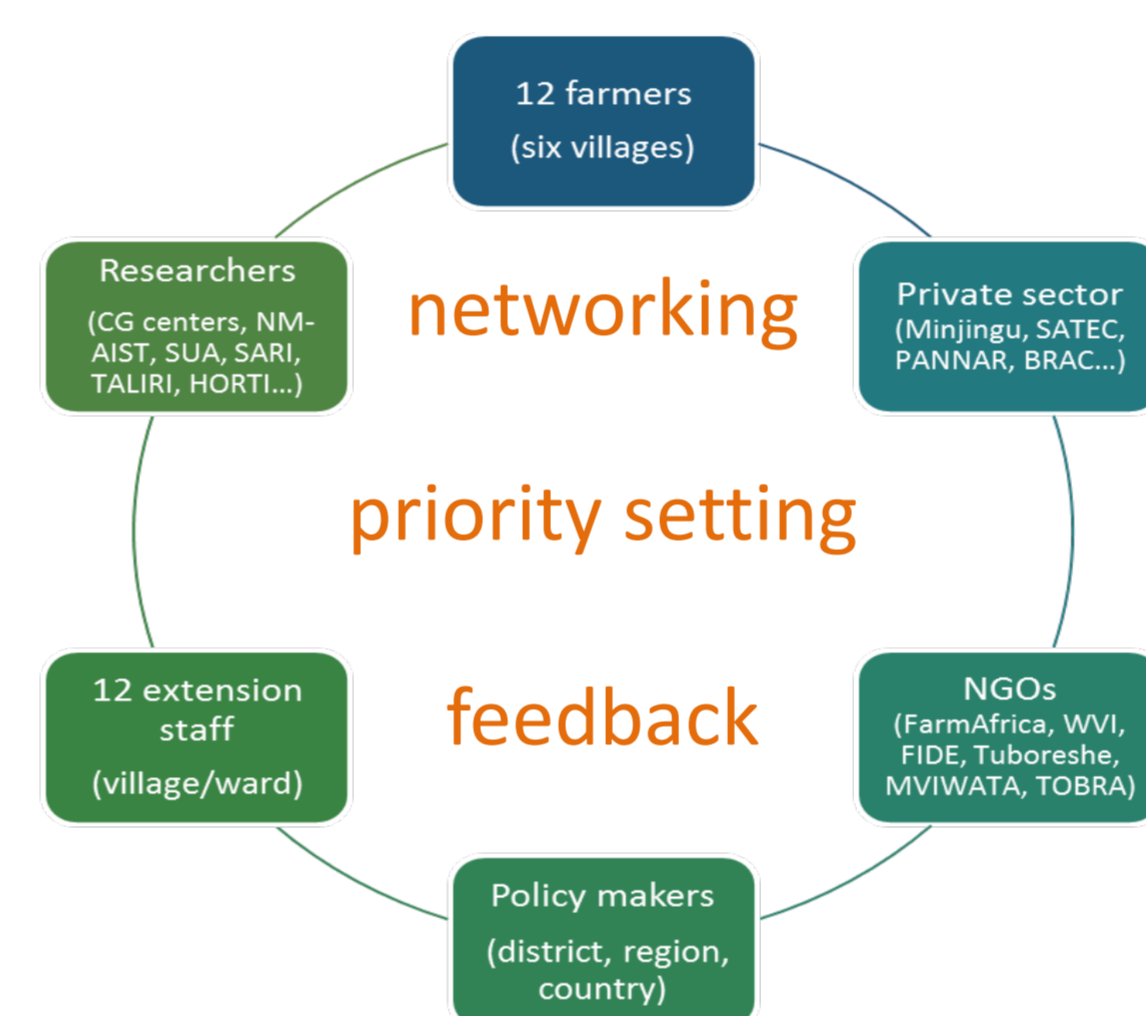

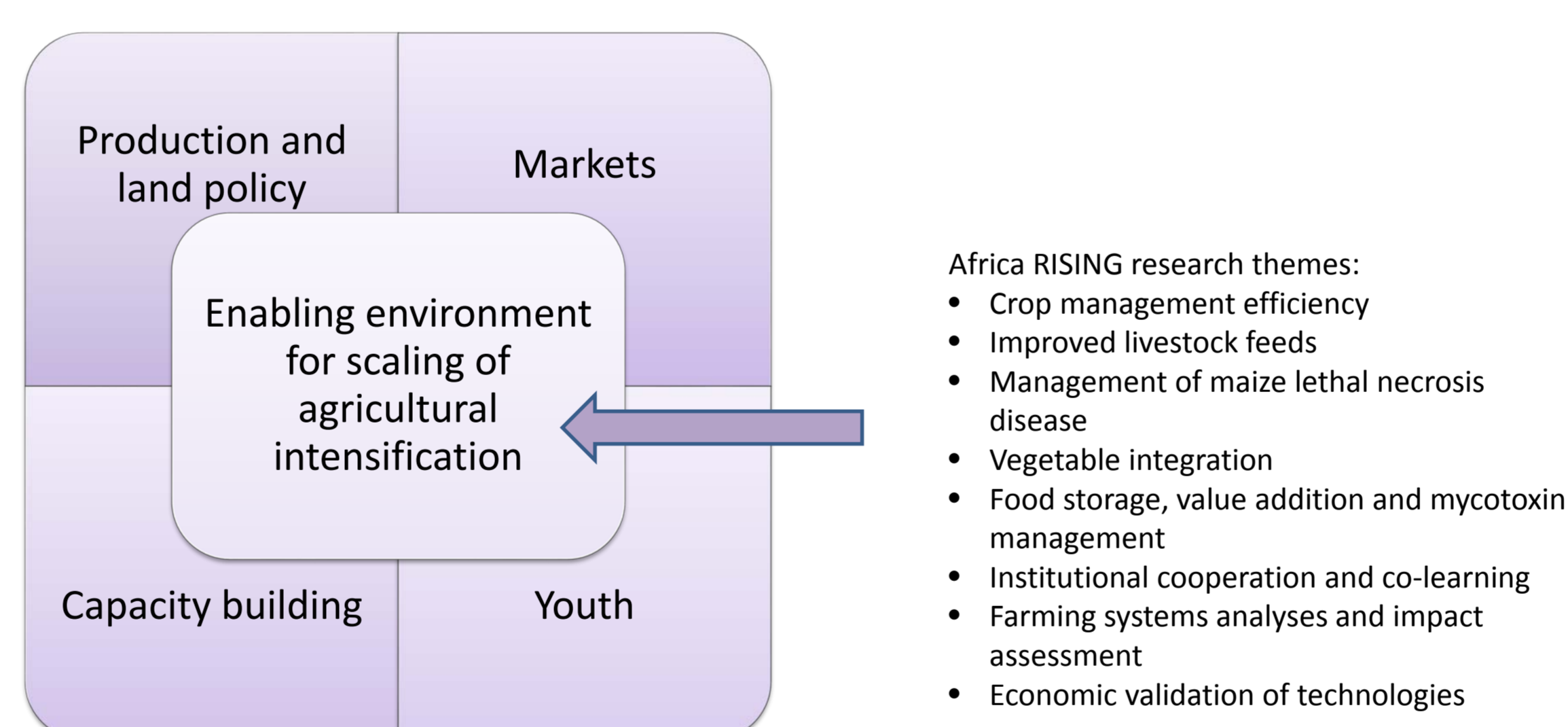*Figure 2. The local innovation system. Major stakeholder groups of the Babati District R4D Platform*

Africa RISING research themes:
- Crop management efficiency
- Improved livestock feeds
- Management of maize lethal necrosis disease
- Vegetable integration
- Food storage, value addition and mycotoxin management
- Institutional cooperation and co-learning
- Farming systems analyses and impact assessment
- Economic validation of technologies

Figure 3. Thematic representation of Babati District R4D platform activities and how Africa RISING research activities feed into the platform

Challenges and Reflections

- We need better understanding of the added value of R4D platforms under different conditions. As with many open-ended processes, we lack insights in what exactly makes R4D platforms effective in changing mainstream practices depending on policy environment, the range of issues involved or the scale(s) at which the platform operates.
- There is an urge to know more about how these platforms function when organized around other constructs than just value chains.
- We must learn more about how to follow up and measure the progress and impact of platforms:
  - Platforms and their contributions to development outcomes. How can success criteria be identified? Which are the most important development outcomes to be addressed by platforms?
  - Efficiency and effectiveness of platforms. Can platforms save time and resources spent on other activities? For which kind of interventions are platforms suitable – or necessary?
  - Sustainability in the local community. Is it reasonable to talk about initiating something that goes beyond the project term? How can sustainability in platforms be measured? What is a reasonable exit strategy?

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