

Seven lessons learned to catalyze African innovation through engagement platforms



Photo: IWMI

Engagement platforms are variously known as multi-stakeholder platforms or innovation platforms. In general terms, an engagement platform is an opportunity for individuals and people representing organizations with different backgrounds and interests to come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and implement solutions. They may engage in design and implementation as a platform, in smaller groups, or individually.

The challenges facing water management in Africa are complex and require multiple perspectives and skills. Platforms allow this joint approach and tend to work better than top down approaches to engage stakeholders and ensure that research addresses real needs.

Over the past ten years, the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF) has used engagement platforms across a wide range of scales to address an equally wide range of challenges. Based on this experience, we offer the following lessons as well as case studies.

Seven lessons from the field

Lesson 1: The most successful engagement platforms are self-reliant, demand driven, evolve over time, and embrace multiple perspectives.

An engagement platform is not a committee. Engagement platforms are dynamic. While there tends to be a core team that actively facilitates interactions among its members, those members interact more or less closely as the problem definition changes and different skill sets are required. Different stakeholders can be involved at different times, depending upon the issues to be discussed. While no one should be excluded, not everyone need be involved at the same time.

Lesson 2: Engagement platforms are useful for dealing with complex problems that require people to work together

Engagement platforms can address a single issue or complex problems involving a wide range of actors. Engagement is used to bring people together to solve complex problems related to natural resource management where institutional innovations can help catalyze uptake of new technologies or approaches. For instance, in Zimbabwe as farmers gain more income from goats, technologies developed years ago are now in demand, such as inter-cropping systems and vaccinations.

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Lesson 3: Build on what is already there rather than set up new platforms and systems.

Build on existing relationships and networks rather than set up new platforms and systems.

It takes time to set up platforms, to get members to understand what they are and how they function, to build trust and develop a collective vision and agenda. Inviting multiple perspectives also means there is a need to understand different agendas and sometimes conflicting mandates. For all these reasons, engagement platforms are best developed around existing relationships, networks and structures. In the Limpopo, CPWF has not set up national platforms but rather linked to SADC and LIMCOM to channel its research results to ensure that results relate to development priorities and that policy makers will request information from the research.

Lesson 4: Engagement platforms are not neutral mechanisms. They aim to promote change so they are disruptive by nature.

Changing existing dynamics may result in winners and losers and may have unknown consequences that could shift dynamics among the actors. Engagement platforms may challenge vested interests in policy-making processes. Unless power dynamics are recognized and addressed, engagement platforms can reinforce existing inequalities. Addressing power and representation during the setting up stage helps make engagement platforms more equitable and effective.

Engagement platforms are based on assumptions that members adequately represent actor groups and are able to work together as peers; that better communication and knowledge sharing will help people understand each others' perspectives and develop a common language; and that people can identify and agree on a common problem and work together to solve it. These assumptions need to be challenged in each case.

Lesson 5: Establishing a set of connected engagement platforms horizontally and vertically stimulates better integration and chances for scaling up processes and impact.

Horizontal links refer to cooperation between platforms situated at the same level (e.g. at district

level). Vertical links refer to cooperation from local levels (e.g. a village, a community) to district, regional, national and sometimes international level. Cooperation does not necessarily mean establishing multiple platforms. Sometimes it may be better to link a single engagement platform to other organizations, networks or individuals that evolve at other scales. Engagement at the national level tends to focus on policy engagement and ensuring evidence based research is feeding into policy processes.

Lesson 6: Platforms can empower local actors to hold higher levels of government to account.

Giving stakeholders a voice is one of the prime functions of an engagement platform. Local platforms connect local actors with actors who perform another function. Research findings at those local levels may influence the role of actors performing above them and may help source evidence that points to responsibilities of these higher level actors. In the Nile, participatory video was used to allow farmers to document their own problems and share these with platforms at district and national level. Titled 'A Rope to Tie a Lion', it presents community views on land and water management and focuses on three issues: unrestricted grazing, water stress and government-led soil and water conservation work.

Lesson 7: Markets provide clear incentives for investments in production.

Engagement platforms help reduce the cost of searching for and reaching markets and allows actors who understand the challenges and opportunities in the local system to devise and test solutions. Engagement platforms are tools for pooling knowledge across the agricultural business, education, research and extension systems to generate, disseminate and use engagement to reduce transaction costs. Engagement platforms have been able to target markets in school feeding programs, military institutions, hospitals, supermarkets, processors and commodity exchanges.

Case studies

In the Nile: Platforms to improve natural resource management and bottom up planning

In Ethiopia, a growing population is putting pressure on natural resources and the livelihoods of local people. Land degradation is making it difficult for farmers to grow crops and feed their livestock, leading to lack of both food and income. CPWF established three local engagement platforms, in addition to a national level engagement platform as a way to include communities and farmers in the development and implementation of improved rainwater management practices.

The purpose of the local engagement platforms is to strengthen coordination among different stakeholders and initiate learning around rainwater management, with the ultimate goal of improving farmers' livelihoods. Unlike traditional rainwater management planning, which is often rigid and top down, the platforms allow for integrated and tailor-made solutions.

At the national level, a platform was established in parallel to existing national platforms. This allowed the platform members to showcase their own experiences, but made it more difficult to insert lessons and experiences into official processes, particularly the Sustainable Land Management Program of the Government of Ethiopia.



Photos: ILRI/Apollo Habtamu



Photos: ICRISAT/Swathi Sridharan

In Limpopo Basin: Goat auctions drive change

ICRISAT set up innovation platforms in Insiza, Matobo, and Gwanda Districts in Zimbabwe. Each platform is a gathering of stakeholders including farmers, traders, rural development agencies and extension officers who meet at regular intervals to discuss production and marketing challenges. The group then identifies possible solutions and evaluates them under real life conditions to determine whether they are feasible.

The platform group in Gwanda decided to tackle its livestock marketing issues by organizing monthly auctions. As these auctions became a regular fixture they grew in importance as a marketing channel for farmers. Farmers who used to sell one or two animals at their farm gate now plan ahead and sell their animals at the auctions, because they trust the system and are able to expect a certain price for their product.

A regular marketing channel with a reliable pricing structure has inspired the recent push in livestock related technology adoption rates. Farmers know what their animals are worth and are willing to invest in technologies that will protect them and see them through the dry season.

While these technologies have been in existence for a long time, it is only now that farmers are using them on a regular basis, mainly as a result of the context created by the recent livestock market development. These platforms are also becoming self-sustaining. Many rural district councils have taken over the management of the innovation platforms started under a project.

Volta: Strengthening Institutions

The farmers in the Volta River Basin are some of the poorest in the world. They rely heavily on rainfall, which can be unpredictable and limited. Even when rainfall is adequate for growing crops, its uneven distribution means high risk of crop loss. It is critical for these farmers to have a reliable water supply.

CPWF has established engagement platforms to explore how local existing water committees can be made operational. Functioning water committees would allow for institutional links between people in communities and higher levels of government. In Burkina Faso, strengthening institutions so that coordination, knowledge exchange, and planning can take place is a prerequisite to improved rainwater management.

After one platform meeting in 2012, a local water committee was spurred to begin meeting independently of the program to develop work plans, thus taking a big step in the direction of institutionalizing its mandate.



CPWF seized the opportunity to collaborate with existing engagement platforms. One such is the Groupe d'Apprentissage sur la Gestion de Ressources en Eau Burkina, a group of government agencies and non-government organizations engaged in action and reflection on integrated water resources management (IWRM) in Burkina Faso. As a result of dialogue initiated through this platform, CPWF is helping set up an online database containing documentation on water management practices in the country and making it readily available to all interested parties.

The CPWF project on sub-basin management and governance of rainwater and small reservoirs examines the multi-level processes and hypothesis that underpin the formulation and implementation of public policies in the water sector through an engagement platform approach in Burkina Faso and Ghana. The project team is developing strong partnerships between researchers and other actors in the sector to shed new light on decision-making processes and making evidence-based recommendations. This approach highlights interdependency, one of the central tenets of IWRM.



Photos: CPWF

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About CPWF

The CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food was launched in 2002. CPWF aims to increase the resilience of social and ecological systems through better water management for food production (crops, fisheries and livestock). CPWF currently works in six river basins globally: Andes, Ganges, Limpopo, Mekong, Nile and Volta.

CPWF is a member of the CGIAR Water, Land and Ecosystems Research Program. The program focuses on the three critical issues of water scarcity, land degradation and ecosystem services, as well as sustainable natural resource management. CGIAR is a global agriculture research partnership for a food secure future. Its science is carried out by the 15 research centers who are members of the CGIAR Consortium in collaboration with hundreds of partner organizations.

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