



Developing innovation capacity through innovation platforms

One of the most important things that innovation platforms do is to build the capacity of their members to innovate. This is a crucial function. Innovation capacity is vital if the innovation platform is to achieve its aims. It is the invisible glue that ties successful innovation platforms together—the ‘capacity to get things done’ (see the Definitions box).

This brief uses the analogy of a traditional African cooking pot to explain how innovation capacity is developed within an innovation platform. It draws on three examples of innovation platforms: in Babure, Uganda; Gwanda, Zimbabwe; and three regions in Ethiopia.



Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Innovation capacity enables groups of people to shape their own future by taking advantage of opportunities and dealing with changing situations. Some key elements of innovation capacity include: self-organization, learning new skills, changing mindsets, valuing others’ roles in innovation, having a holistic view, being able to adapt to changing situations, creating new ideas, recognizing opportunities, being proactive, using indigenous ideas, and looking to the future.

Like a cooking pot

An innovation platform is like a cooking pot. The pot is the container where innovation capacity can develop, given the right preconditions and ingredients. It is a collective cooking pot: innovation platforms are about collective action to solve complex problems.

Various people gather around the pot: farmers, government officials, community leaders, researchers, private investors, and civil society. These are the members of the innovation platform. They all help to cook: feeding the fire, adding ingredients, stirring the contents, and serving the broth.

Each contributes specific skills, knowledge and capacities—the ingredients that go into the pot.

There is no one recipe, but a few key ingredients can make success more likely: scientific knowledge, local knowledge, facilitation techniques, training, mixed with social learning.

- A helping of scientific knowledge enabled members of the Babure innovation platform in Uganda to increase their sorghum production (Case 1).
- A dollop of local knowledge, people's networks and their skills enabled farmers in Zimbabwe to come together to buy feed in bulk, so negotiating prices down by more than half (Case 2).

Case 1. A new sorghum drink for Uganda

The Babure innovation platform in Uganda focuses on sorghum. The platform first tackled the productivity of the crop. Researchers in the platform recommended several measures, including improving the soil fertility, resulting in improved yields. But that led to a new problem: the market could not absorb the larger amounts of sorghum the farmers were growing. Prices fell, and farmers could not sell their crop.

Platform members realized the need to create a new market. They suggested developing a new product to use the extra grain. Two platform members (Makerere University and the Huntex group, a private sector processor), jointly developed a non-alcoholic beverage made from sorghum. This is an improved form of a local drink known as 'Bushera'. The Makerere researchers managed to prolong the shelf life of this drink from a few days to about two years without additives.

Known as 'Mamera', this patented product is now available in supermarkets and generates income and jobs for the farmers and the processor.

More: Adewale Adekunle (aadekunle@fara-africa.org)

- A handful of facilitation techniques fosters understanding of the expectations of all stakeholders, the role they play in the overall system and their relationship with others (Brief 10).

- A fourth important ingredient is social learning. In Ethiopia, a learning and practice alliance, driven through process documentation and exchange visits, was formed by nine platforms in three regions and at the national level (Case 3).

Mixing ingredients together is no good without a catalyst: the fire.

The catalyst may be an external organization that initiates the platform and triggers innovation. Or it may be internal factors and market conditions. In Babure, for example, the market could not absorb the amounts of sorghum that platform members produced. That was a catalyst for developing a new product, a sorghum-based drink.

What comes out of the pot? After bringing ingredients and helping with the cooking, the chefs naturally want to enjoy the bowls of soup they have prepared. Innovation platforms can serve up various benefits for their members: more profits from product diversification in Babure (Case 1), or cheaper feed prices in Gwanda (Case 2).

Innovation capacity

What is innovation capacity? It is like the cooking process in the pot. It is where individual platform members, and the platform as a whole, develop the abilities to find solutions to problems and to respond to opportunities.

There is no single way to develop this capacity. It may seem effortless to an outsider: outcomes (tasty, nutritious soup) suddenly emerge from an unruly mess of ingredients.

But there are a few essentials: the participants have to interact well; the facilitation has to be suitable, and all those involved must have the patience to let the process unfold (Brief 10).

Paying attention to the process and to learning by the group is central to developing a sustained capacity to innovate, as is appropriate training to develop relevant capacities locally.

Brief 1 outlines a seven-step process which innovation platforms generally follow, from initiation to analysis and learning. Innovation capacity can (and indeed does) occur in all these stages.

For example, many straightforward methodologies exist to help innovation platform members identify problems and come up with innovations to address them. But it is during the later stages—testing and refining solutions, analysis and learning—that most of this ‘magic’ takes place.

Innovation capacity can go beyond the members of the platform. They can share their new experiences and insights with people and organizations outside the platform: they share their soup with others.

The cases here illustrate innovation capacity at the local level, it can also be developed at higher levels, such as in policymaking (Brief 2). These processes can be sustained and replicated if they are monitored and documented (Case 3 and Brief 5).

The tangible results of an innovation platform (better incomes, lower costs etc.) are a result of an intangible product: innovation capacity. Perhaps because it is intangible, innovation capacity is rarely explicitly included in a project design. It is often seen as an implicit side-product.

Even in RiPPLE (Case 3), which made special efforts on this front, process documentation eventually fell through the cracks and was abandoned two years into the program as management and donors emphasized formal monitoring instead.

Not a panacea

Just as a cooking pot is not the only way to prepare food, innovation platforms are not the only way to enhance innovation capacity. And if the pot is rusty—if it lets unhealthy power relationships taint the contents, the soup will be a lot less tasty. Brief 4 explains how to avoid this.

Project designers should be wary of innovation platforms as a ‘solution looking for a problem’. They should identify the right conditions or entry points for this type of intervention.

Case 2. Self-organization and changing mind-sets in Zimbabwe

In the 2011 dry season, livestock farmers in Gwanda faced severe feed shortages. Using information and skills they had gained from their innovation platform, the farmers began to buy feed in bulk. Local agrodealers were selling feed at USD 21–26 for a 50 kg bag. But the manufacturer in Bulawayo sold the same bag for USD 12.50. The dealers justified the difference by pointing at the low turnover of feed.

The farmers clubbed together through the platform to buy a lorry-load of feed at a time. In October and November 2011, 250 farmers collectively bought 40 t of feed worth USD 15,000. Each farmer spent an average of USD 60 on feed. By acting together, they bought the feed at a price that was more cost-effective. And they could feed their animals through the dry season. Now, neither ICRISAT (the originator of the innovation platform) nor the platform itself is involved. Farmers continue to self-organize and engage with the local private sector suppliers and traders.

Through collective action in the innovation platform, farmers understood the value of their livestock; they were able to analyse the constraints (high local prices) and resolved this through efficient problem analysis and they devised solutions by pooling resources.

More: Andre van Rooyen (a.vanrooyen@cgiar.org)

Finally, innovation platforms are not meant to last forever. Once the underlying problems they were formed to address are resolved, they should not be kept alive artificially.

On the other hand, the innovation capacity that develops through the process can (and should) live on—again underpinning its importance as a key output of the innovation platform.

Enhanced innovation capacity is one of the most sustainable outcomes that innovation platforms can strive for.

Case 3: Using process documentation to maximize social learning in Ethiopia

RiPPLE, a water-supply and sanitation project in Ethiopia (www.rippleethiopia.org), used process documentation to record activities of the innovation platforms it sponsored. This aimed to chronicle the involvement of key actors, understand how their capacity developed, check how learning manifested itself, and assess how culture enabled or hampered this learning.

Social learning happened in each of the platforms, with ongoing documentation by the RiPPLE team and platform members; across platforms through exchange visits between regional platform members; and across scales by inviting *woreda* platform members to present findings at the regional platform meeting, and *woreda*/regional platform members to do the same at FLoWS meetings. Monitoring and evaluation helped capture progress and process around these platforms too.

More: Ewen Le Borgne (e.leborgne@cgiar.org)

Innovation platforms are widely used in agricultural research to connect different stakeholders to achieve common goals. This is one of a series of briefs to help guide the design and implementation of innovation platforms. A contribution to the CGIAR Humid-tropics research program, the development of the briefs was led by the International Livestock Research Institute; the briefs draw on experiences of the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food, several CGIAR centres and partner organizations.

Credits

Authors:

Birgit Boogaard (ILRI), Iddo Dror (ILRI), Adewale Adekunle (FARA), Ewen Le Borgne (ILRI), Andre van Rooyen (ICRISAT) and Mark Lundy (CIAT)

Artwork: Beniyam Seyoum, Tewodros Girma and Alfred Ombati

Editors: Paul Mundy and Peter Ballantyne

Layout: Meron Mulatu

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ILRI is a member of the CGIAR Consortium

Box 30709, Nairobi 00100, Kenya
Phone: +254 20 422 3000
Fax: +254 20 422 3001
Email: ILRI-Kenya@cgiar.org

Box 5689, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Phone: +251 11 617 2000
Fax: +251 11 617 2001
Email: ILRI-Ethiopia@cgiar.org

