



Linking action at different levels through innovation platforms

Innovation platforms typically operate in a limited area: their own village or district. But agricultural constraints may exist at wider levels making local changes ineffectual. Introducing new agricultural practices in a village, for example, may not be enough if national policies prevent farmers from getting inputs. Improving farmer incomes may mean persuading a national supermarket to change its buying policy.

Complex natural resource management problems involve interactions and trade-offs at different levels (farm, watershed, basin, landscape), which cut across administrative levels and require actions from each.

Similarly, national level innovation platforms may lack the ability to intervene at the local level: they lack the information they need to develop appropriate policies, and the local contacts they need to put them into effect.

This brief discusses ways to facilitate learning and problem solving across innovation platforms at different levels (vertical linkages) and between initiatives located at the same level (horizontal linkages).

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.

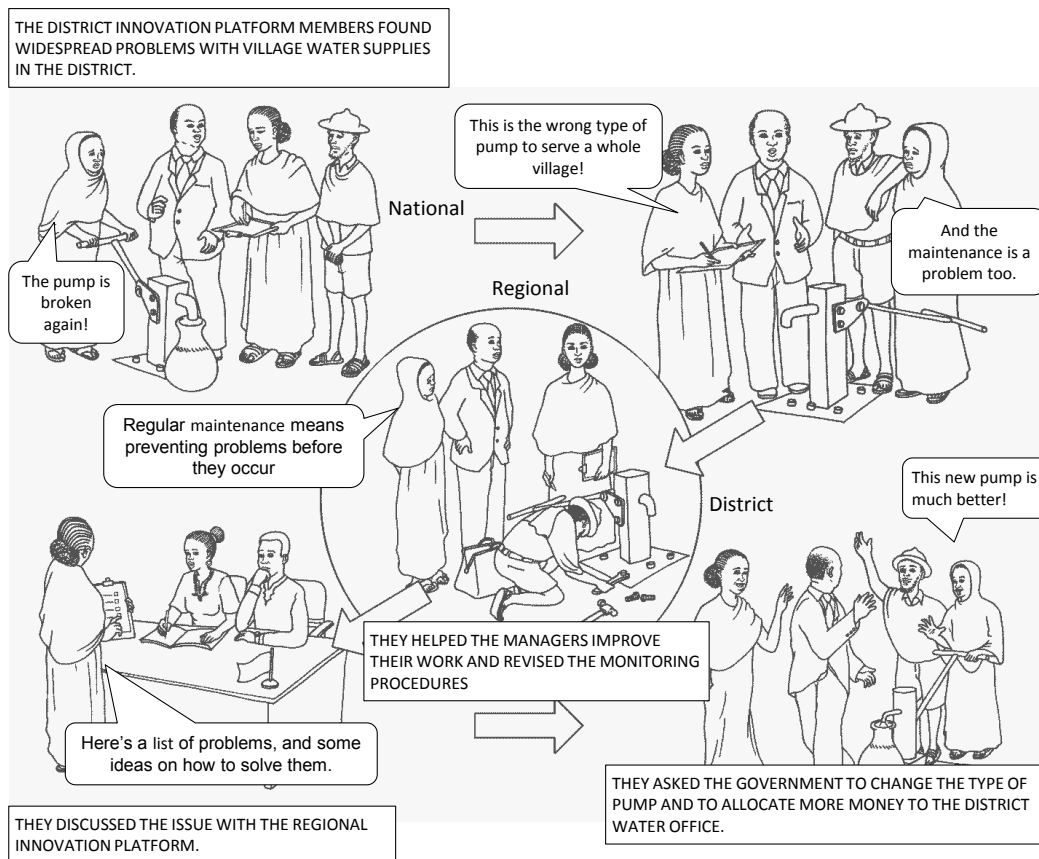
Vertical linkages occur among innovation platforms organized at different levels: community, district and national.

Horizontal linkages occur among platforms situated at the same level (e.g. in multiple districts) to strengthen their bargaining position or for learning.

Vertical linkages across levels

Platforms at different levels offer different things.

- Local innovation platforms aim to generate action on the ground. They enable communities to engage directly with innovation processes.
- National innovation platforms aim to influence policy processes and negotiate access to national and international markets (Brief 2).



Linking innovation platforms vertically (across levels) and horizontally (with other platforms at the same level) has many benefits

- Intermediate levels are important as this is where policies are often operationalized and where monitoring of policy should occur.
- International platforms can explore high risk or controversial issues at the national level, but which may be further developed at national level once their importance is proven (Case 1).

Linking these different types of innovation platforms offers several potential benefits.

Scaling out successful innovations. National and intermediate levels can help scale out successful innovations from the local level. Linking from local to higher level platforms can shortcut lengthy processes to disseminate promising innovations.

Empowering local actors to influence policy. Local platforms can empower local actors to hold higher levels of government to account. This happened in RiPPLE (www.rippleethiopia.org) where district officials used evidence generated by an innovation platform to advocate for increased budgets and new water supply technology choices (Tucker et al. 2013).

Fostering dialogue in policymaking. Strengthening linkages between platforms at different levels can stimulate learning and dialogue in policy processes. For example, national policymakers may start to understand why farmers are reluctant to improve the management of natural resources if they lose yield in the short term (Brief 2). Intermediate levels are important—often neglected—ways to make these local to national links happen.

Establishing innovation platforms at more than one level is one way to stimulate this kind of coordinated action, for potentially greater impact.

Developing value chains. Large businesses and farmer associations are important to link producers to higher value markets, and to address industry practices or standards which hinder market access. In Nigeria, the MARKETS program supported ‘innovation clusters’ of small-scale sorghum producers which helped them to organize and more efficiently supply major breweries.

Increasing legitimacy and learning. Making local links can enhance the quality of policy processes and outcomes (Brief 2). It also improves the legitimacy of national or international platforms.

Innovation platforms across multiple levels can channel interactions and help provide feedback from local levels, although influence on decisions is never guaranteed by the presence of a platform alone. They can also provide a forum to integrate work on different themes, although care must be taken not to dilute the focus.

Horizontal linkages

Horizontal linkages are those that connect platforms or initiatives working at the same level: within a project or between projects, from district to district or from country to country.

Cross-learning. Sharing experiences across platforms or initiatives working on similar issues may encourage learning and stimulate innovation. There must be a common interest and a basis to assume that lessons will be transferable. Papa Andina, a program led by the International Potato Center, for example, brought local level platforms in different countries together at periodic international meetings for horizontal evaluation (Thiele et al. 2006).

Joining forces to empower local actors.

Where several platforms identify similar constraints, they can join forces to make a stronger case for action. These may cut across sectors. For example, a program working on irrigation development and another on livestock may both find that a lack of local credit is holding up their efforts. Linking groups of small-scale producers can also increase their power to negotiate with others in the value chain.

Creating linkages

Some programs establish platforms at multiple levels and developed mechanisms for cross-learning, both vertically and horizontally. This can involve:

- **Cross-representation**, in which one or two members from each platform attend meetings of others, to share updates and help develop complementary activities. It is important to think about who will represent a platform fairly at other levels and be able to work effectively in different settings. The presence of a higher level, more powerful actor must not be allowed to suppress discussions.
- **Participation in activities**, such as research studies or pilot interventions, across platforms. This may well be an effective route to learning; it can be very powerful, for example, for higher level actors to speak to communities and see realities on the ground. Horizontally, it can enable different platforms to see how others tackle challenges and gain new ideas.
- **Experience sharing**, in which programs organize events for representatives to come together. This may be most suitable for cross-learning between platforms at the same level that face similar challenges.
- **Communication materials** made available online or handed out at meetings.
- **Informal communication**, where links between platforms are made around particular issues or emerging needs. This may involve subgroups rather than whole platforms.

Facilitators are key to making these links happen. They can initiate and support conversations between platform members and identify opportunities for joint learning and action. Platforms need to be adaptable and avoid unnecessary communication requirements—flexible and informal modes of communication are key (Brief 7).

Are multiple platforms necessary?

Establishing multiple platforms allows strategic and coordinated problem-solving across multiple levels, on clearly determined issues, on a regular basis with a relevant set of stakeholders. But it has costs, as platform facilitation and support is resource-intensive (Brief 12). It also adds to the number of meetings, networks and forums which stakeholders engage in, so any new platform or linkage should be established only if it adds clear value. It may be preferable to engage existing groupings, or just to work with relevant organizations and individuals.

Some examples:

Link to existing policy forums for influence.

Many countries already have groups that play formal or informal roles in decision-making. Where these are effective in influencing policy, bringing issues identified by platforms to them may be more effective.

tive than setting up a parallel platform. The risk is that agendas may conflict and priorities of the innovation platforms may not represent priority issues for the whole group (Brief 2).

Make informal links to relevant people and organizations. In some cases it is enough to simply involve people or organizations from outside the platform. This can be a good way to bring in specific expertise that is not in the platform, for example, from universities or certifying bodies.

Capitalize on existing contacts. Platform members have their own contacts who may be valuable platform partners. In the Convergence of Sciences-Strengthening Innovation Systems (CoS-SIS) program in Ghana, one district level platform member was a warehouse manager for an international cocoa buyer and could get information on cocoa pricing, helping producers in the platform enter new markets. Making such linkages needs innovation platform champions able to identify opportunities for collaboration across different levels and connect different stakeholders and networks (Case 2). These may be researchers, facilitators or platform members.

Case 2. Connected champions make links

To address barriers and enable change, platforms need people able to build linkages beyond a platform. The role of these network champions is clearly seen in the CoS-SIS program. In West Africa, a village level innovation platform wanted to tackle problems caused by local oil-palm processing mills burning tyres for fuel. The resulting pollution was harming villagers' health and lowering the quality of the product. The Director of Agriculture in the district brought actors from across the palm-oil value chain together to listen to the concerns of platform members. As a result, the District Assembly banned the burning of tyres. More: Nederlof and Pyburn (2012).

References

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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:

Josephine Tucker (ODI), Marc Schut (Wageningen UR) and Laurens Klerkx (Wageningen UR)

Artwork: Beniyam Seyoum, Tewodros Girma and Bonaventure Nyotumba

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

