



## Facilitating innovation platforms

*'By noon the meeting was completely derailed. Julius looked tired and confused. The night before he had made a detailed program, but now it seemed all in vain. He wanted to talk about water conservation, but farmers were more interested in a new pest species that affected their crops. The representative of the department of agriculture had apologized for the meeting, while the water conservation expert felt lost'.*

Sounds familiar? Some say that innovation platforms are as good as the facilitator who guides them. Although facilitation is not easy, this does not mean it cannot be done effectively. This brief provides some guidelines.

Innovation platforms are groups of stakeholders, often with different backgrounds, who come together to address challenges and opportunities in a particular issue or area. Members represent organizations or groups that have different but complementary objectives and interests, such as farmers, traders, research, government etc. (Brief 1).

These stakeholders do not naturally want to cooperate or share information. They may have divergent interests, or even compete with each other. Skilful facilitation is needed so they agree on common goals and activities.

### 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.

Facilitation of innovation is a flexible and adaptive process during which facilitator(s) manage dialogue and stimulate collective problem analysis by multiple stakeholders to overcome challenges or make use of opportunities.

### What is facilitation about?

To bring about lasting and positive change, an innovation platform needs to address issues on and off the farm. Each issue may involve a different set of stakeholders. It is necessary to influence not only the way farmers think and make decisions, but how other stakeholders behave too. These system-level changes need careful facilitation (Case 1).

## Case I Managing change in small ruminant value chains in Zimbabwe

Innovation platforms and associated interactions among diverse stakeholders has led to changes for small-scale livestock keepers in southwestern Zimbabwe. Managing and facilitating the process over time helped achieve impact.

Initially the platform in Gwanda identified goat production and marketing challenges. Once it was confirmed that the most limiting factor was market access, the platform involved other stakeholders (buyers, transporters and auctioneers) and local government structures mandated with livestock marketing. Once the local markets were developed, the focus of the platform shifted towards the processors (the abattoir) and the input side, linking farmers to feed suppliers. This illustrates how the agenda and composition of the innovation platform evolved over time.

While the innovation platform is a dynamic process, it should not lose its primary focus to develop functional local agricultural systems, even though this may require us to do a lot of innovation platform work off-farm!

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Innovation platforms often go through a cycle that includes initiation, deciding on a focus, identifying options, testing and refining solutions, developing capacity, implementing and scaling up, and analysing to learn (Brief 1). Platform members have to be guided through each of these steps. This requires a range of skills, some interpersonal and others more technical in nature.

Maintaining everyone's interest and commitment is vital to ensure that the platform focuses on issues that matter to its stakeholders. The stakeholders need to understand how their individual roles contribute to the larger whole and that collective action towards common goals benefits all.

Innovation platforms are often needed because the players involved were not communicating in the first place. Trust and mutual respect need to be fostered between actors in developing new or strengthening ongoing relationships. It may be necessary to avoid or resolve conflicts, and to change the composition of the platform in order to deal with new aspects as they arise.

Innovation platforms operate in changing environments, and they aim to promote change. Flexibility is important to adjust objectives and activities to changes. All the stakeholders need to be aware of this and understand the process. It is the facilitator's task to make sure they are on board.

### Different functions and roles

Facilitation has moved away from its usual role in meetings and groups, to that of knowledge or innovation brokering with a wider set of stakeholders. This requires a clear understanding of the different expectations of all stakeholders, the roles they play and their relationship with other players. To achieve this, facilitators in innovation platforms can provide a range of functions. These include:

**Establish the innovation platform.** Once a problem requiring an innovation process is identified, a facilitator convenes an initial meeting of stakeholders. Participants analyse the problem, and additional stakeholders are identified and invited to the next meeting.



**Identify issues.** Facilitators help members chart a platform's course and define the challenges and opportunities it will address. Facilitators may solicit further studies or consultations to identify or confirm problems, information needs or policy frameworks. Often a platform tries to tackle too many issues at the same time, or drifts off target. The facilitator should make sure it stays focused on priority tasks (as identified by the platform).



**Manage meetings.** After a platform is set up and the key issues identified, a facilitator convenes and manages regular platform meetings. He or she ensures that objectives are reached, and that all members can express their views. He or she energizes the group or slows it down, as needed.



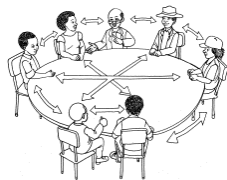
**Support activities outside meetings.** Much of the innovation process and the platform's work takes place outside formal meetings. The facilitator coordinates these activities by establishing working groups, coordinating the



allocation of tasks, helping set objectives, and ensuring they are implemented, documented and followed up. He or she builds relationships with other stakeholders and invites them to collaborate with the platform. Outcomes of the activities are shared with the members at subsequent meetings.

### **Manage communication.**

The facilitator nurtures relationships among the members, coordinates interactions, negotiates if needed, and facilitates collective learning (Brief 7).



### **Deal with conflict and power.**

Stakeholders often perceive others as competitors, so do not share information. They may want to monopolize the process and prevent others from participating. The facilitator prevents such power struggles and addresses them if they arise. He or she tries to help the platform members realize they all have an interest in finding solutions and creating opportunities (Brief 4).



### **Monitor, document and report.**

The facilitator ensures that meetings and the process are well documented and reported (Brief 5). He or she recaps periodically to make connections between sessions.



### **Facilitate and advocate institutional change.**

The facilitator helps the platform advocate for policy changes, generate new business models, and stimulate new relationships among the actors (Brief 2).



**Develop capacities.** Although many innovation platforms focus on the immediate job at hand, it is important to ensure that stakeholders learn and develop their capacity to innovate on other topics (Brief 8). The facilitator helps them reflect on innovation processes and their perspectives on them.



## **Skills and attributes**

Good facilitators maximize cooperation and collaboration among members of the platform. They possess critical skills: flexibility, a natural networker, a knack for developing cooperation and partnerships, a strong and wide personal network, a capacity to manage relations over time, a good sense of negotiation and power dynamics, the ability to manage conflict, a listening ear, and group facilitation skills.

As process oriented approaches do not have fixed goals and time frames, it is important that a facilitator guides members towards development outcomes. A facilitator should have a broad knowledge about the subject, the system it is embedded in, and the fields of expertise of the members. He or she does not have to be a content specialist, nor have preconceived notions on ways to solve problems.

The facilitator must fully identify with a participatory process, be sensitive to cultural and gender differences, and help weaker stakeholders engage. This may lead to conflicts where the facilitator has to mediate between interest groups (Case 2).

### **Case 2. Mediating power dynamics: Lessons from the Nile Basin Development Challenge**

As part of a project in the Ethiopian highlands, district level innovation platforms were formed. The starting points were the identification of agreed natural resources issue to work on. During a series of 'community engagement exercises' in one of the sites, farmers identified termite infestation as a priority issue. Local government representatives, however, insisted that soil erosion should be prioritized. The facilitators realized that if government agendas dominated the process it was likely to reduce community engagement. Together with researchers, the facilitators identified an intervention that met several needs: a termite-resistant fodder species called Chomo grass. This would help to conserve soils, rehabilitate grazing areas and provide livestock feed.

To help platform members reach consensus, facilitators had to understand the social and political context and local power dynamics, and help members understand that their issues and concerns were interconnected. It was critical to establish trust. Instead of tackling the issue of government dominance head on, they encouraged joint learning through active engagement.

More: <http://nilebdc.org>



## Who facilitates?

A facilitator must be neutral and objective, able to work with all, and not push any particular agenda.

### Case 3. Towards self-facilitation: The imGoats project in India and Mozambique

The imGoats project on goat production and marketing in India and Mozambique used innovation platforms to help goat producers, small-scale traders and input and service providers improve goat value chains.

Two international NGOs (BAIF in India and CARE in Mozambique) took the lead, but the platforms were meant to become self-managed. In Mozambique, members elected a team of value chain actors to take over the facilitation of the platforms, while in India community animal health workers volunteered to do so. Although they gradually took over responsibilities for facilitation and coordination, they faced two big challenges: linking different actors outside the platform, and strategic networking with government agencies. Especially in the initial stages, they needed support and capacity development from the project managers.

More: <http://imgoats.org>

The person facilitating may change over time. As the platform matures, the original facilitator may allow someone else to take on the role (Case 3). Some tasks may rotate among members.

Whether a facilitator should be an insider or an outsider depends on the purpose and main focus of the platform, the sensitivity of the topic, as well as local capacities. In general, facilitation should stimulate and support stakeholders to work as a self-organized and self-managed innovation system. Handing the process over to local intermediaries (or facilitators) is part of that process. It is often easier to take over the facilitation of meetings than the wider role.

## 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

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