

Introduction to the Blended Learning Program for Facilitators of Innovation Platforms

26 June 2015

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Why this program is being made available

Across the CGIAR and beyond, there is a recognition that the solution to many agricultural problems lies not in simple technology transfer but in the collective intelligence and effort of multiple stakeholders including, among others, farmers, traders, researchers, financial organizations, and policy makers. Various names have been given to these partnerships and the approach of working together to find innovative solutions. Examples include learning alliances, multi-stakeholder and self-help groups, social learning and social differentiation approaches, and innovation platforms. Significant learning has occurred about what leads such partnerships to generate innovative, cost-effective and sustainable transformations. This learning can be found in formats ranging from academic articles, to videos, to learning materials used in a rich variety of face-to-face training programs.

The purpose of this course is to harvest this learning into a cost-effective and time-efficient training program that can be used by organizations interested in using the partnership approach to confront complex agricultural problems.

Who this course is for

In this course, we use the label 'Innovation Platform' for the partnership approach described above. However, the course is equally directed to those engaged in, or intending to engage in, multi-stakeholder processes, self-help groups, social learning approaches and learning alliances. There is significant common ground between these approaches and it is this common ground that this course addresses.

The target audience for this course are often busy people with multiple demands on their time. They may face constraints of time, distance and cost that make lengthy face-to-face training workshops an unattractive option. They can be expected to come to the course with a common interest in learning how to set up, facilitate and sustain innovation platforms. However, their backgrounds will be dissimilar. Some will have had a high level of exposure to participatory practices, some will already be involved in innovation platforms and be currently confronted with issues of power dynamics or the need to learn from sound monitoring and evaluation practices, and some will be facing a completely new and daunting challenge.

The course design recognizes this range of needs by:

- Providing content knowledge in a self-paced online modality which allows learners to learn at their own pace – to dive deeply into lesson content if desired, or to skip familiar sections. A content mastery test provided at the beginning and end of each module will allow learners to self-assess their prior knowledge so that a judgment call can be made on whether the module can be skipped in favor of spending more time on more advanced modules.
- Making this content available both through ILRI's online learning management system (LMS) and on ILRI's purpose-built offline LMS for learning environments where bandwidth access is unreliable or intermittent.
- Including activities to be conducted in face-to-face mode to provide an opportunity for learners to discuss their experiences and challenges in the light of the content knowledge covered in the online course component and their own diverse and complementary backgrounds. This modularized design for face-to-face training/workshops will enable course organizers to choose between conducting longer standalone workshops, piggy-backing onto other events, or conducting smaller, more frequent workshops where resources are available.

How the course addresses the needs of learners

The course design draws on the instructional design services of ILRI's Capacity Development Unit and the knowledge and experience of subject matter experts (SMEs) from ILRI, IITA, ICRAF and Wageningen University to sequence content and learning experiences so that learners can rapidly acquire and retain the skills and knowledge needed to effectively facilitate innovation platforms.

The course design is based on a constructivist approach which recognises that learning occurs as the result of interacting with the content and with other learners.¹ The self-paced online learning modules will include frequent quiz questions to provide feedback to the learner on their progress and a rich variety of interactive learning assignments.

Related workshop modules are based on highly interactive group exercises that challenge learners to apply the skills and knowledge gained through the online program. Many of the exercises are based on case studies of existing innovation platforms recently compiled by ILRI's Capacity Development Unit.²

A course pre- and post-test with subsequent analysis of effect size and significance tests will provide feedback on course effectiveness. Individual learner statistics such as time spent on task, results on inline quizzes, and participation in group exercises such as chats and discussion forums will be generated through the ILRI LMS.

What does the course cover

Upon completion of the course participants will be able to:

- Define what is meant by a complex agricultural problem
- Identify prerequisites to finding innovative solutions

¹ <http://www.learning-theories.com/constructivism.html>

² https://www.dropbox.com/sh/g7in0a4hmstkcto/AAAKc-k_I97NqTl2HlanQFxTa?dl=0

- Identify the basic differences between agricultural innovation systems and technology transfer approaches
- Recognise situations in which TT approaches are appropriate and those where an AIS approach is needed
- Choose participatory methods appropriate for stages of the IP life cycle
- Distinguish between RRA and PRA
- Describe an Innovation Platform and similar participatory partnership arrangements
- Decide on the optimal composition of an Innovation Platform based on a stakeholder analysis
- Describe the process of setting up an Innovation Platform
- Use a visioning tool to establish a common goal for an IP
- Decide the appropriate course of action to be followed by an Innovation Broker confronted with common IP scenarios.
- Plan a IP meeting to analyse problems and identify opportunities for innovation using a participatory tool of own choice
- Assess the impact of own personal style in facilitation, communication, leadership and dealing with conflicts
- Use appropriate participatory methods to respond to common IP scenarios.
- Plan the use of monitoring tools including MSC stories to develop a learning history of an IP.
- Demonstrate the use of a range of communications tools.
- Suggest strategies for sustainability of an IP faced with different scenarios.
- Plan organisational structures and rules of engagement for an IP
- Design an M&E framework for an IP.

The table below provides more detail on the course content.

No.	Module	Schedule
1	<p>Complex Agricultural Problems and the Need for an Innovative Approach to their Solution.</p> <p>Agricultural problems are frequently multi-dimensional and their resolution lies in action taken at different levels (local, national and even international) and with the inputs of a diverse range of actors. Complex agricultural problems require innovative solutions. In many cases changing contexts require that these innovative solutions constantly evolve requiring planning cycles supported by regular monitoring and reflection to generate short feedback loops. This module looks at what defines a complex agricultural problem and considers the circumstances under which innovative solutions emerge.</p>	<p><i>Addressed in Mekong workshop 2014</i></p>
2	<p>From Technology Transfer (TT) to Agricultural Innovation Systems (AIS).</p> <p>This module builds on module one to introduce Agricultural Innovation Systems and explain how they differ from previous approaches to resolving agricultural problems. Case studies and evaluations of the approach are used to critically review the advantages and limitations of the approach.</p> <p>The evolution of approaches to the resolution of agricultural problems from TT to AIS parallels the evolution of development interventions in general from a top-down approach to a participatory one. The Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) approach of the 70s and 80s where farmers were seen as a source of information has gradually moved to the current participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach which emphasizes empowerment, partnership and sustainable action. As participatory approaches are key to the success of IP facilitation, this module presents a framework for participatory learning and action and provides an overview of relevant participatory tools.</p>	<p><i>Addressed in Mekong workshop 2014</i></p>
3	<p>Innovation Platforms – an Overview</p> <p>This module examines the nature and function of an Innovation Platform and how closely the concepts of multi-stakeholder processes, learning alliances, self-help groups, social learning and innovation platforms are related.</p>	<p><i>Addressed in Mekong workshop 2014</i></p>
4	<p>Composition and Initiation of the Platform</p> <p>Setting up an effective Innovation Platform is a demanding task. It is important to select the right people for the task – people at a sufficient level of seniority to be able to make or influence decisions but not so senior that they are unable to make the time to participate fully. There are questions of equity and power dynamics to be considered. This module introduces the process of stakeholder analysis – an essential tool for selecting the right mix when setting up new systems.</p>	<p><i>Addressed in Mekong workshop 2014</i></p>

	<p>We also discuss the option of building a platform on the foundation of an existing informal group and examine case studies of groups who have taken this option.</p> <p>In both cases it is important to establish a common vision and we discuss how visioning tools can assist with this.</p>	
5	<p>Coordination and Facilitation of the Platform</p> <p>Facilitators of Innovation Platforms, sometimes referred to as Innovation Brokers, perform the essential role of easing interaction between actors in the IP. They may be called up on to mediate between bodies or organizations who are already collaborating or identify potential collaborators. They may have to find funding and support for innovations or advocate for policy change to scaffold innovation. They have a role in capacity building, learning and providing thematic expertise.</p> <p>Brokering is a very dynamic role, demanding a variety of skills and knowledge - from communication and conflict management skills to content knowledge about the issues at stake.</p> <p>This module looks at the role of the Innovation Broker and the skills that a person taking on this role should acquire.</p>	<p><i>Addressed in Mekong workshop 2014</i></p>
6	<p>Tools for Analysis and Planning – Group 1</p> <p>This module and the one that follows provide an introduction to a number of tools in use in Innovation Platforms to scaffold the initial participatory analysis of the problem(s) and to help stakeholders identify opportunities for innovation.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. RAAIS (Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Innovation Systems). In a RAAIS session, representative stakeholder groups are taken through a process of identifying challenges to innovation, categorizing those challenges, identifying the level at which interventions need to be made to address them, identifying the type of research needed to address them, and, ultimately, coming up with an agreed Action Plan for Innovation. 2. EXTRAPOLATE (Ex-Ante Tool for Ranking Policy Alternatives). This tool uses a computer-based decision support system to conduct an ex-ante analysis of the likely impact of alternative policy interventions on the livelihoods of stakeholders including the poor and marginalized to help platform members decide which policy interventions to prioritize. 3. Collective Systems Analysis. This approach uses an innovation system matrix to identify barriers to innovation both in terms of system components and the actors or organizations which control that component of the system. Participants reflect on the root cause of the barrier and identify opportunities that could facilitate a transition to a new system. An important feature of this approach is the generation of guiding questions related to recognized barriers that can be addressed at regular intervals to remind participants of the ultimate goals of the platform and to help them reflect on whether their activities remain relevant to the achievement of those goals. 	<p><i>Addressed in Mekong workshop 2014</i></p>

7	<p>Tools for Analysis and Planning – Group 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. CIAT tools and methodologies to make market linkages work. CIAT ‘s Decision and Policy Analysis Research Area (DAPA) has developed a series of participatory tools and good practice guides to foster the entry of smallholders to markets. Various tools support the development of partnerships; the evaluation of market trends and identification of market opportunities; supporting smallholders to develop business plans; the development of business support services; the assessment of project performance; the introduction of mechanisms for scaling up; and advocacy for improved marketing and trade policies. 5. Site Selection Guidance for Humidtropics. These guidelines are based on empirical evidence that the interaction of the three socio-economic and biophysical layers —population density, agricultural potential and market access — provide good explanatory power in predicting the type of agricultural problems or opportunities that will exist. 6. COMPASS (Co-innovation and Modeling Platform for Agro-eco System Simulation). This is a series of modeling tools which can be used to support experiential learning and decision making in participatory settings. 	<p><i>Addressed in Mekong workshop 2014</i></p>
8	<p>Power and Conflict in the Platform</p> <p>Innovation Platforms provide an opportunity for the voices of all stakeholders in an innovation system to be heard. However, power relations between people and organizations in the platform can bias the discussions and decisions made because some voices are heard, while others are not. They can muddle conversations, impair relationships and destroy trust between members. This module looks at Stakeholder Analysis as a tool to help platform facilitators understand the agendas of different actors and to identify who amongst the members of an IP might create barriers and who might act as mediators. It looks at approaches such as participatory video, role play, and participatory rural appraisal which can be used to give marginalized members a voice. Finally, the module explores options for training in negotiation skills for subgroups adversely affected by power dynamics.</p> <p>Despite all this, conflict may result. The module provides an overview of conflict management skills and links to training opportunities for facilitators.</p>	<p>Aug 31- Sept 04</p>
9	<p>Communication</p> <p>Communication is the life blood of any innovation platform whether that means communication between the members of the platform, publishing in print or online to get the message out to supporters and potential platform members, recording the story of the platform as it evolves for monitoring, evaluation and learning purposes, or communicating for advocacy. Good communication requires a mix of interpersonal and technical skills.</p>	<p>Sept 07 - 11</p>

	<p>In this module, we look at the communication skills required to develop a “Learning History” of the organization including documenting platform activity, recording MSC stories and documenting insights and lessons learnt.</p> <p>We look at communicating for advocacy by sharing stories and updates on the Internet through blogs / participatory video / photos –films and by writing issue papers.</p>	
10	<p>Resources, Incentives and Timeframe</p> <p>Although many platforms are initially set up with budgets for sitting fees and other payments to individuals, experience has shown that this strategy seldom works. Even when individuals are motivated to attend meetings, there may not be buy in from their organisation. This module looks at alternative incentives for ongoing active involvement and addresses the need to keep the correct balance between meetings, actions and reflection; to appeal to the private sector citing clear business opportunities and long-term benefits; and the importance of initial successes.</p> <p>Even where sitting fees are not paid, innovation platforms are intensive in terms of the financial and human resources required to keep them going. Meanwhile, public funding for IPs seldom lasts long enough. In this module we look at strategies for sustainability including scaling out and institutionalisation. We also look at strategies for retaining donor support as long as possible through pro-active M&E and communications strategies.</p> <p>Finally, all platforms need to have clear rules for engagement. There may be an advantage in formalising these arrangements by having a board or a committee which is accountable towards platform members and/or donors. However, this should not be done at the expense of the flexibility to bring on board different actors at different times, to build bridges with organisations, networks and initiatives at different levels, and to change plans of action to be responsive to a change in context or where initial action plans do not work as expected. Donor support for an open project planning approach is desirable. This module looks at how some platforms have evolved into more formal structures without losing flexibility.</p>	Sept 14 - 18
11	<p>Implications of Complex Agricultural Problems for M&E – Introduction to Reflexive Monitoring</p> <p>Agricultural problems are often complex involving a diversity of stakeholders and embedded in systems (regulations, infrastructure, cultural norms) which may not be stable. This module explores the implications of this complexity and instability for monitoring and evaluation and emphasizes the need for reflection and reflexivity in the IP planning -> implementation ->evaluation -> redesign management cycle. The learner is introduced to the reflexive monitoring approach which strives to keep a balance between process and output indicators; between monitoring for learning and monitoring of tangible outputs.</p>	Sept 21- 25
12	<p>Theory of Change and Impact Pathways</p>	Sept 28 – Oct 02

	<p>This module looks at how to involve stakeholders in generating a Theory of Change / Impact Pathway to explicitly state how the action plans agreed to above are expected to help realize the Platform goals. Members of an Innovation Platform should regularly revisit their Theory of Change to reflect on whether their original expectations about impact pathways were realistic and whether there have been changes in context which might require them to revise their plans.</p>	
13	<p>Tools for reflexive and participatory monitoring and evaluation.</p> <p>This module builds on earlier modules which looked at M&E tools for learning and reflection including MSC, Timelines and Learning Histories and tools for documenting and communicating these. It extends this discussion and draws on the concepts of Theory of Change and Impact Pathways introduced in Module 7 to discuss theory-based evaluations in general. The emphasis is on the use participatory evaluation approaches involving stakeholders and donors to both achieve and demonstrate impact.</p>	Oct 05 – Oct 09