



## Impact of innovation platforms

*“Innovation platforms are the new way to do development. Bringing different people together to jointly deal with problems avoids scientists developing solutions to problems that don’t exist. Many bottlenecks to development are about people – unless we use people-centred approaches we won’t overcome the bottlenecks”*

*“Not another innovation platform. Innovation platforms are a complete waste of time. All you guys do is endlessly talk to one another. Where is the action? What have you achieved?”*

These are two perspectives familiar to people working with innovation platforms. In the complex web of relationships that surround agricultural development, innovation platforms are a good way to get to the root of problems and can bring about real, durable change for many people.

But showing their impact is tricky: their costs are high early on and effects may be slow in coming, hidden under the surface, and hard to predict, measure and attribute. However, the complexity of farming systems and food security leads to the question: can we really afford to ignore apparently costly approaches such as innovation platforms just because they’re challenging?

### 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.

### Key questions

Innovation platforms have become a popular way to stimulate positive change in smallholder agriculture. In principle, they bring together a range of stakeholders to identify and solve common problems. They ensure that different interests are taken into account, that stakeholders together work out solutions (brief 1).

In practice, we discover hard truths and difficult questions: Is it worth all the effort and resources? Is our context fit for innovation platforms? What is emerging from our efforts? Are we seeing income benefits to poor farmers? Are we seeing any changes in the way decision makers think, non-governmental organisations talk or farmers operate? If changes are occurring how do we measure them? Indeed, what do we measure? What hard evidence do we have that things are working?

## Coping with complexity

Given the difficulties knowing whether innovation platforms work and whether they represent value for money, most people prefer to stick with 'business as usual'. The old approaches of promoting promising technologies, using demonstration plots and training farmers seem like good ideas.

However rural agricultural systems are complex, involve many different people and perspectives and may require complex approaches to dealing with bottlenecks. Business as usual is tantalizingly simple, but it does not address the very real complexity of how agricultural systems function.

Innovation platforms can deal with this complexity since they bring the right people together and avoid blind alleys or inappropriate interventions. People identifying their own issues and designing their own solutions are much more likely to follow through and make changes than if all this comes from outside.

## Value for money

Innovation platforms are really worthwhile when they provide value for money. But what do we mean by value? In a platform designed to support market development, the platform is worthwhile if value chain actors, especially poor producers, earn more money through its actions. In platforms dealing with environmental issues, the value is less obvious to point to – it could be a healthier natural environment which eventually brings better income. But these benefits are thinly spread and only become obvious over long time scales.

For innovation platforms dealing with national policy issues, value is also difficult to pin down. How do we track the effects of a platform through changes in policy or regulations, changes in behaviour of people and on to benefits for farmers? How do we measure the value of these changes relative to the costs of running a platform? How can we be sure these changes are due to the platform?

Difficulties demonstrating value for money can lead to platforms being dismissed out of hand. But, just because value for money is difficult to measure, it doesn't mean the value is not there. We need to experiment with ways to monitor impact to answer these questions.

## Case I. Benefits for poor goat keepers

The LiLi-Markets project in Mozambique (run by the Institute of Agriculture Research of Mozambique, ICRISAT and ILRI) established innovation platforms to link farmers to livestock markets in Chicualacuala and Changara districts.

The innovation platform members highlighted the dire need for an abattoir in Chicualacuala and basic market infrastructure in Changara. In Chicualacuala over 80 cattle were slaughtered under trees every month. Without proper processing and cooling, huge losses were incurred when the meat was transported to Maputo. Meanwhile, the rudimentary market infrastructure in Changara resulted in serious stress and losses to the 100 cattle and 500 small stock sold each month.

The platform members presented these issues and the potential benefits to donors and development agencies. As a result, the Food and Agriculture Organization provided USD 35,000 to construct an abattoir in Chicualacuala. In Changara, the Ministry of Agriculture contributed USD 70,000 to build a new market. Sale of goats by poor livestock keepers has now become a firmly established market channel with strong livelihood benefits to many farmers.

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## How do platforms achieve impacts?

Innovation platforms achieve impacts in four ways:

**By providing information and resources to platform members.** Sometimes the solution to a problem is obvious (at least to a specialist), but the people involved are not able to put it into effect. Much of the work of innovation platforms is to identify such issues, find ready-made solutions, and channel information and resources to those who need them. The innovation platform makes this process more efficient by bringing all the various actors together to solve the problem.

Example: Farmers complain about a pest attacking their crop. An extension specialist gets a photograph of the pest, contacts a researcher, who identifies the pest and says how to control it. The extensionist passes this on to the farmers. A seed company (also a platform member) supplies seed of a resistant variety and a microfinance institution offers loans to help the farmers buy it.

**Through research.** Sometimes the answer to a problem is not obvious. Research is needed. The innovation platform identifies the most important issues, selects promising ways to solve them, and tests these. It monitors the results and provides information to the members who need it.

This differs from standard research in two important ways. The research is often participatory with farmers heavily involved (even in charge of the process). It also involves other platform members. It thus draws on all their skills and expertise.

Example: Farmers complain about a pest attacking their crop. Platform members do not have a ready-made solution, so they conduct trials in farmers' fields. These identify a couple of resistant varieties, which the seed company multiplies and distributes.

**By negotiation and persuasion.** The solution may require several groups and organizations to change their behaviour. The innovation platform acts as a negotiating platform where members can agree on a compromise acceptable to all.

Example: Farmers say they cannot sell their goats. Traders say there are not enough goats. The abattoir says they are of poor quality. The groups agree that farmers will invest in feed and veterinary care if they get a guaranteed price; the abattoir offers them credit so they can buy inputs; the traders agree to pay a fixed price and pick up the goats at a collection point on a particular day.

**Through lobbying and advocacy.** Here, the target for change is a third party, such as a supermarket or government. The platform gathers evidence of the problem and evidence that it can be solved. Using this, it lobbies for changes.

Example: A large number of goats were slaughtered in unhygienic conditions to meet local demand for meat. The innovation platform persuaded a donor to construct an abattoir, and lobbied the authorities to build a market to handle the trade in live animals (see Case 1).

These methods are not mutually exclusive: the impacts of an innovation platform are likely to result from a combination of these and other mechanisms.

## Why is demonstrating impact hard?

Despite the potential of innovation platforms, it can be hard to demonstrate their impacts. Why is this?

Achieving impact is difficult. The problems that innovation platforms attempt to solve tend to be complex. They tend to involve divergent interests, conflict and uncertainty. Finding a solution may take a long time: research may take several years, and persuading a government ministry to change a policy can take even longer.

Impacts are also hard to measure. Many impacts of innovation platforms, such as 'innovation capacity' are intangible and hard to quantify. There is often a time lag between a platform's activities and its impact and many actors are involved, each perhaps claiming success and making attribution difficult. It is also hard to separate out the effects of a platform: has farmers' income been increased by the platform or by something else?

Measuring benefits is tricky. Many benefits are unforeseen or are side benefits difficult to grasp. Thus, the many interactions stimulated by a platform may develop 'innovation capacity' among members in which they are better able to deal with new changes and find innovative solutions. Platform members may improve their ability to think critically as a result of their participation. Getting people together to discuss key issues can improve communication and build relationships which lead to innovation. These side benefits are difficult to measure (brief 5).

Innovation platforms are hard work, but their promises are also a long-term endeavour. They are often set up and run as part of three or four year projects but sometimes don't bear fruit for 8-10 years. And sometimes the benefits are different to what was expected and are seen in different places to those originally targeted. All this makes short-term assessment of impact challenging.

In assessing the impact of platforms we need to focus in the short term on assessment of changes in behaviour of those involved and leave the longer term, more tangible beneficiary benefits for later impact assessments. We need to accept that short-term impact on beneficiaries may be limited but that the behavioural changes arising from innovation platforms have potential for much larger impacts in the long term.

## No recipes for success

Criticizing innovation platforms for lack of impact is common. Many development professionals seek silver bullet approaches and find innovation platforms too cumbersome. However, sticking to technical issues that can be solved with technical research misses some of the key bottlenecks to development – those associated with the people and organizations at the heart of agricultural systems. There is a danger that innovation platforms are discredited before we have the evidence for their usefulness.

Innovation platforms are sometimes presented as a panacea – the solution to all our problems. But replicating innovation platforms is difficult. There are no blueprints, recipes or silver bullets. Each innovation platform is different, operates in a unique context and involves a particular set of people. Dismissing them because they are just talk shops is not sensible until we have worked out their long term impact. We need to manage expectations and not be overly influenced by those demanding quick fixes.

## Case 2. Changing water policies in Ethiopia

Traditional water supply schemes in Ethiopia serve a single use: domestic, livestock or irrigation. A learning and practice alliance (a type of innovation platform) in Goro Gutu commissioned research that showed that multiple-use schemes that serve all three needs were better value for money. The district water office now incorporates multiple uses into the planning of all new schemes in the district.

This research was presented at a national level platform run by RiPPLE, a water supply and sanitation project. Along with advocacy efforts by RiPPLE and non-government organizations, this encouraged policy-makers to recognize multiple-use services as a service delivery approach in the national sector plan. The officials said that the research findings were credible in part thanks to the local platform process. This involved government staff and other stakeholders setting the questions, taking part in data collection, and validating results. They also said it was important that experienced researchers provided quality control.

More: [www.rippleethiopia.org](http://www.rippleethiopia.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

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