



Power dynamics and representation in innovation platforms

The farmers in Gebugesesa village spent the whole day planting elephant grass seedlings on several hectares of grazing land. The next day, they came back and uprooted all the seedlings. Why?

They had been told to plant the seedlings by government extension agents who were members of an innovation platform in Ethiopia. Other members of the platform—officials from the Bureau of Agriculture—had to meet national government targets for soil and water conservation, so pressured the platform to mobilize farmers to plant the grass and enclose the area. The farmers agreed to plant the grass, but were afraid that the fencing would stop them grazing their animals and that poorer people would not be able to collect dung for fuel.

Although the innovation platform had several farmer members, they were overruled by more powerful government staff. The initial fodder interventions were abandoned and the platform had to relocate this work to another community.

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.

Power dynamics is the relationship between individuals in a group who have different amounts of power.

Why are power and representation important?

Innovation platforms bring together less powerful people (such as farmers) with more influential actors (such as government or big traders). The combination of these different actors can be a catalyst to develop solutions to common problems or to achieve a common goal. If their interests are harnessed effectively, innovation platforms can be a powerful mechanism for change.

In theory, members of the platform are equal and have a chance to articulate their needs. Practice is often different. Unless this is recognized and dealt with, a platform can reinforce these inequalities.

Failure to resolve power and representation issues may seriously harm the functioning of an innovation platform. It can affect the priority given to issues, the selection of entry points, as well as the design and adoption of interventions. If some voices are ignored or if a group is not represented, they may disengage leading to inappropriate interventions that exacerbate rather than solve problems.

How do these issues emerge?

Innovation platforms often assume that members work together as equals, that they represent whole groups, that they can identify common challenges and opportunities, and that they can develop trust and capacities to work together on shared goals.

Power differences can negate these assumptions. Some community members are wealthier or more influential than others. Women farmers may have different priorities from men. Government officials may want to enforce rules rather than meet community needs. Traders may manipulate access to information and markets at the expense of farmers. Academics may promote new technologies but ignore local knowledge. Getting the 'right people' together does not automatically lead to an inclusive process or solutions.

Power relations matter because the interests of members may be in conflict. It can be difficult to find an agreement that works for everyone. Some members may lack information or are unable to challenge more powerful actors. As a result, their interests are not reflected in platform decisions. Where platform members are supposed to represent wider groups, the selection of these representatives is critical.

If they are not addressed...

Power can be expressed in various ways, some more obvious than others. The first step in addressing them is to identify them. Here are examples.

More powerful members may dominate. They may restrict others from expressing their views and thus get their agendas acted on. Interventions are likely to benefit the powerful, increasing their power and further marginalizing weaker members.

- Examples: Richer or more influential members may appropriate new infrastructure (water sources, sales pens) as their own. They may manipulate members by acting as middlemen between buyers and farmers. Or they may use their knowledge to exploit the ignorance of others. The organizers of a platform may predetermine what issues it should address or restrict the solutions that can be applied. Government officials may use the platform to promote existing policies and projects.

Group diversity is not reflected. Farmers differ in their livelihood, knowledge, priorities and needs. If the platform only has one farmer member, he or she may not properly reflect this diversity. This leaves some farmers without representation.

- Examples: A platform may focus on livestock issues even though most farmers do not own animals. It may promote high-value markets, excluding farmers who cannot fulfil the market criteria. Or it may encourage men to plant certain crops, making more work for women.

Not all knowledge is used. Differences in power can influence whose knowledge is shared.

- Examples: Scientists or experts may come to dominate platform discussions, reinforcing the view that scientific knowledge is superior to farmers' own knowledge.

Identifying power and representation issues

The local context should be thoroughly investigated before establishing a platform. A baseline analysis provides initial information, and makes it possible to assess the impact and equitability of interventions. Investigating the broader economic, political and cultural context may reveal reasons for power or status imbalances.



Skilful facilitation is needed to overcome difficult power relationships

Power dynamics and issues of representation vary from place to place, and the chances of changing these dynamics will also vary. Issues of power may be more problematic within politically sensitive or restrictive environments. Understanding this early on makes it possible to navigate potential barriers and manage expectations.

Stakeholder analysis is critical to identify key actors and their roles, and to understand who might represent different groups and help achieve platform objectives. It can also help identify who might create barriers and who might act as mediators. This helps ensure that the right people are included from the start. Stakeholder analysis also enables facilitators to understand the agendas of different actors.

It is important to monitor power relations after setting up a platform. Continuous observation and documentation of platform activities is important; it is important to look further than just any successes. The more difficult aspects of facilitating innovation platforms can teach valuable lessons.

Some questions to prompt reflection and analysis:

- Who is involved? Who is missing and why? How is membership decided and by whom?
- What are the interests of the various actors, and how do they conflict or converge?
- Whose problems or needs are prioritized? How is this decided, and by whom?

- How does control over resources (e.g. budgets) affect who influences decisions or actions?
- How do platform actions affect members? Who benefits, and who does not? Have the impacts on all stakeholders been considered?

Dealing with power and representation

Participatory rural appraisal can help identify and prioritize problems, obtain the opinions of all community members and give them insights into others' situations.

Participatory video is particularly useful for illiterate groups. They can take photos and shoot video of their problems and record their points of view. Showing the video to platform members can open their eyes to new issues. Videos can be shown to officials who have not visited the field.

Roleplaying in which platform members step into someone else's shoes helps them understand different points of view.

Skilled facilitators help mediate between the different interests of platform members so they reach consensus—or at least a compromise acceptable to all. This role can be hard for insiders (one of the platform members) who may be part of the power structure. Outside facilitators who are not part of local power relationships can be better. Facilitators may need to advocate on behalf of less powerful members or take on neutral roles (Brief 10).

Evidence from research on benefits can help members see the value of platform membership.

Subgroups can give extra focus on the needs of specific groups. They can give marginalized members more power or build their capacities, for example, by providing training in negotiation and leadership skills or by facilitating collective action. In Ethiopia, for example, innovation platforms on natural resource management recognized that local authorities did not know how to facilitate participatory planning and implementation. A subgroup was created to train them.

Overcoming power differences in Gebugesa

In the Gebugesa case described above, facilitators used a combination of participatory video and role plays to overcome power differences. They encouraged platform members to reflect on power issues, changing both their attitudes and practice. Government staff began listening to the concerns of farmers, who had initially struggled to make their voices heard. Platform members started using a more collaborative approach to design and implement activities. As a result, interventions were more tailored to the needs of farmers.

Using informal spaces is a good way to address power dynamics outside formal meetings. The best approach depends on the context. One facilitator may openly prompt platform members to consider power dynamics. Another may use practical engagement and active learning. Exchange visits between platforms can share lessons and experiences.

Links between different levels are often necessary for local level platforms to address higher level constraints (such as inappropriate policies). Seemingly powerful local actors may struggle to make their voices heard at a higher level. One approach is to establish a national level platform (Brief 9).

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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Other briefs in this series

- 1 What are innovation platforms?
- 2 Innovation platforms to shape national policy
- 3 Research and innovation platforms
- 4 Power dynamics and representation in innovation platforms
- 5 Monitoring innovation platforms
- 6 Innovation platforms for agricultural value chain development
- 7 Communication in innovation platforms
- 8 Developing innovation capacity through innovation platforms
- 9 Linking action at different levels through innovation platforms
- 10 Facilitating innovation platforms
- 11 Innovation platforms to support natural resource management
- 12 Impact of innovation platforms



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