



## Research and innovation platforms

Innovation platforms are advocated as a promising way to find solutions to complex problems, such as those in agriculture and natural resource management. As social, economic and environmental problems grow ever more complex, researchers need to engage more actively with stakeholders such as farmers, development practitioners and policymakers to explore, design and implement solutions (Schut et al. 2011; Calow et al. 2013). Innovation platforms offer them an opportunity to do so.

Researchers are not necessarily part of innovation platforms. Platforms can work well without any research inputs, or with only peripheral involvement by researchers. But in recent years, interest in how innovation platforms can benefit, and benefit from, research has increased considerably.

The traditional approach to research assumes that experts (i.e. researchers) generate knowledge, which farmers and others adopt, resulting in change. In reality, such a linear approach often has a limited impact: the research turns out to be inappropriate, and the findings are not used. In response, much research has shifted towards more collaborative and reflexive mode, with a lot more collaboration between researchers and other stakeholders.

### 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.

Action research engages potential research users (e.g. policymakers, planners and implementers) in a process of 'learning by doing'. Practical solutions to problems are developed as part of the research process. In contrast to traditional research, action research is linked to implementation and has an explicit agenda for change. It is often seen as a cycle in which a team of researchers and stakeholders jointly identify desired outcomes, diagnose problems, pilot approaches, evaluate their impact, and propose improvements and get back to the cycle (Tucker 2008).

This brief discusses two questions:

- How can research contribute to innovation platforms?
- How can innovation platforms support research?

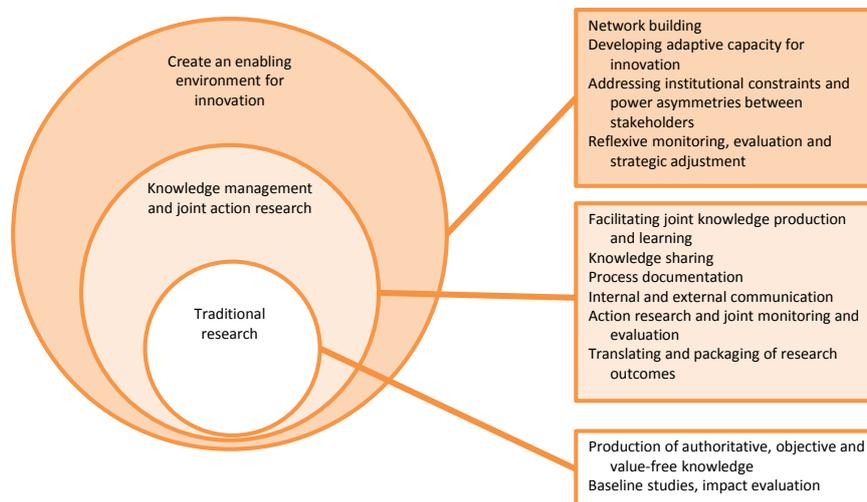


Figure 1: Three ways that research can contribute to innovation platforms

## Research supports innovation platforms

Research and researchers contribute to platforms in at least three ways (Figure 1). The categories are not mutually exclusive, but are embedded in one another.

### Traditional research

Traditional research aims to produce authoritative, objective and value-free knowledge and technologies. It is up to farmers, policymakers and other potential beneficiaries to put these into use. The innovation platform can call on researchers to do specific pieces of research, develop technologies or plug gaps in knowledge. Researchers can also conduct baseline studies and evaluate the impact of an innovation platform (Case 1 and Brief 5).

#### Case 1. A research-supported platform

A government-initiated, inter-ministerial innovation platform in Mozambique collaborated with civil society and private sector actors to develop a policy for sustainable biofuels. Between 2008 and 2012, researchers from Wageningen University supported the platform by making an inventory of biofuel activities in the country (traditional research), facilitating and documenting platform meetings (knowledge management) and fundraising and lobbying to create an enabling environment for collaboration. Supporting different stakeholder groups throughout the policy process was challenging, as stakeholders had conflicting needs and interests.

More: Schut et al. (2011).

### Knowledge management and action research

Knowledge management makes research more accessible and interprets it so people can understand and use it. There are many ways to do this: identifying shared objectives, producing knowledge jointly, learning together, documenting innovation processes and best practices and communicating results.

Platform members can be involved in action research. They can help design and implement research, and can monitor and evaluate the platform's work. Researchers may take the lead in such research, or play more coordinating and backstopping roles. They can also train and develop the capacity of the platform members to carry out research (Brief 8).

### Enabling environments for innovation

Innovation is largely enabled or constrained by institutional factors (such as rules and policies) and political factors (such as conflict among stakeholders). Researchers can support platform members in securing funds or gaining the ear of policymakers. They can also build the capacity of members to address power dynamics in the platform. Such functions may be critical to the outcome of platform activities.

### Innovation platforms support research

Platforms enable researchers to engage with potential research users (such as policymakers and farmers), providing research with a solid base and making it more likely that findings get used. Engaging stakeholders in research can help identify research questions and desired outcomes, and can improve data collection and analysis (Case 2).

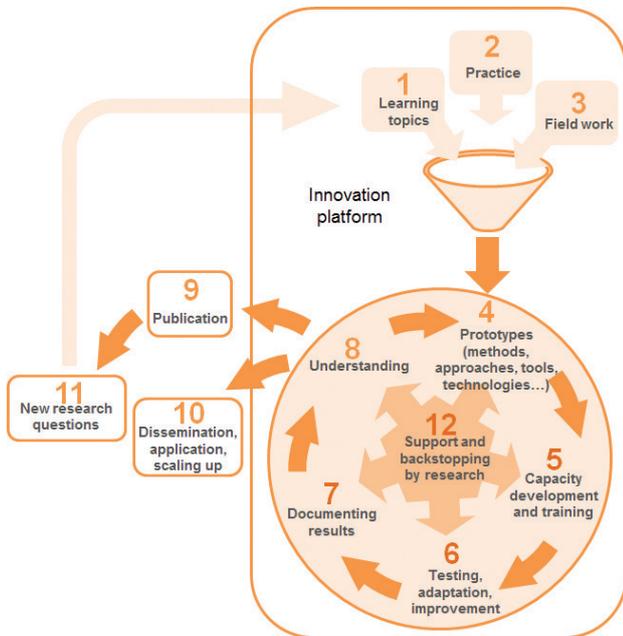


Figure 2: The research process in innovation platforms

- Members agree on a timetable and procedures, and allocate roles and responsibilities to test the prototype (6). These may build on or align with existing collaborations among stakeholders. Testing may be supported by research, or by outside specialists. It may result in further adaptations and improvements.
- The process is documented so stakeholders can learn and experiences can be shared (7).
- Results can then be analysed (8), published (9) and disseminated (10).
- It can also lead to new questions for the platform or traditional research (11).
- Throughout, research provides support and back up to platform activities (12).

## Case 2. A research-initiated platform

The Nile Basin Development Challenge uses innovation platforms in a 3-year (2011–13) project to improve rainwater management in Ethiopia. Researchers play multiple roles: establishing the platforms, facilitating and managing them, obtaining funding for pilot interventions, building the capacity of members, and process documentation. Because innovation platforms were new to their members, building trust took time. The power dynamics and representation of stakeholders were also a challenge: it was necessary to get the right balance to prevent powerful individuals from hijacking the research agenda.

More: <http://nilebdc.org/>

Innovation platforms can support various stages in the research process (Figure 2).

- The process starts when members jointly identify topics they wish to learn about (1), Ideas may come from community knowledge, practitioners (2) and previous findings (3).
- Platform members discuss prototypes (the methods, approaches, tools or technologies) that may address issues at stake (4).
- It may be necessary to offer training and develop capacity to test the prototypes (5).

## Benefits

Research and innovation platforms contribute to one another. Research strengthens innovation platforms: their work is better informed, more systematic and more credible. Platforms can also strengthen research so it is more applied, more realistic, more acceptable, and more likely to be adopted.

Instead of considering costs and risks of contributing to platforms, researchers might seek mutual benefits, so platforms help research fulfil its mission.

Researchers may take different roles in innovation platforms. They may play a coordination or facilitation role they may play a minor or supporting role. Roles may change over time. Some platforms are initiated by researchers and other stakeholders take them over. Some platforms are initiated by others and researchers are invited to join.

## Risks

Innovation platforms are not without risks.

- **Dominance by research.** Compared to other platform members, researchers tend to be high-status, well-educated and articulate. They may inadvertently dominate platform activities.

- **Differing timetables.** Research tends to be driven by annual budgets, so researchers are pressed to get activities done on time. Innovation platforms tend to use more participatory approaches that may take more time.
- **Differing agendas.** Researchers may find that the platform's agenda conflicts with research aims. Experiments, for example, may lack scientific rigour or the platform may steer activities in an unpredictable direction, away from what researchers or funders regard as a priority. Research leaders may not allocate staff time and resources to activities they see as having a limited payoff.

## 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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