



AFRICA MATTERS

SOME POLICY RELEVANT LESSONS EMERGING FROM THE RIU COUNTRY PROGRAMMES

The Africa country programmes were established with the explicit agenda of experimenting with ways of building capacity that enables research to be put into use. The main tool deployed as part of this agenda was the establishment of innovation platforms — a family of approaches focused on linking organisations working on various topics around which the private sector is or should be prominent. Over the past twelve months, the scope of the country programmes has been slimmed down to ensure a more manageable set of experiments.

Some RIU country programmes are private companies, while others are integrated into agricultural sector policy bodies or ministry departments. Notwithstanding these differences in institutional provenance, following the renewed focus of the programmes, the role of the RIU country teams has progressively evolved from the active implementation to facilitation of necessary linkages or the elimination of obstructions and similar tasks. The impact of these activities — now commonly described as innovation brokering — on the ability of the systems in which the country programmes operate to cope, respond, and prosper under changing conditions, indicates that these brokering functions fill an important institutional hiatus.

In Tanzania, growing demand for poultry meat has not been filled by the increased import of frozen poultry and the rearing of commercial broilers, as consumers continue to have a distinct preference for the taste and food preparation qualities of local birds. While that market had been exploited by the occasional small producer and trader, there had thus far not been the enabling environment to allow the systemic sector changes required. RIU-Tanzania, through its linking of actors, negotiation, knowledge sharing and facilitation of sector dialogues, is building a local poultry sector network that is turning urban demand growth for poultry into an opportunity for small producers and rural entrepreneurship by adapting and utilising new and existing research outputs and technology. It is also stimulating private investment in the broad range of input and output services required.

In contrast, in Malawi, a cotton innovation platform tried to increase farmers' seed cotton yield per unit area through application of recommended technologies in a stagnant sector with frustrating results. While not denying the importance of such problems, such contrasting experiences highlight that investment in new and dynamic rural sector opportunities may often have better pay-offs in terms of contribution to economic growth and poverty reduction.

Activities by the RIU country programmes have actively engaged the private sector in areas such as smallholder pig marketing and fingerling production in Malawi, the local poultry sector in Tanzania, and micro-tuber production in Rwanda among other examples. Entrepreneurship is, however, not uniformly developed across all sectors and all nations. Nevertheless, increasing linkages among local and global markets mean that most market-oriented rural development initiatives need strong private sector involvement to succeed — particularly in light of the continuing retreat of the State in most developing economies.

The evidence from the RIU country programmes suggests that, in light of such rural development scenarios, not only are private sector actors taking on roles that are commonly thought to be under the purview of the public sector or civil society, but conversely, the absence of private financial initiative has led to the emergence of a new member of the institutional architecture: Often rooted in civil society or the public sector, these budding organisations use public or donor money to perform private sector brokering and other private sector roles.

The results obtained in the RIU country programmes in funding the activities of these nascent groups, such as in the case of speciality rice processing and marketing in Zambia and cowpea storage in Nigeria, which are indicative of new avenues where development donors may want to direct their investments to stimulate rural innovation and development.

The policy implications of these preliminary findings of the ongoing experimentation in the building of innovation capacity clearly indicate that, agricultural innovation, rather than simple investment in research and technology initiatives, may also require the establishment of independent rural development brokering agencies. In addition, while the private sector may be ideally placed in some sectors, local circumstances may currently limit their role in many areas. In light of this, coalitions of private, public, and civil society sector actors are important in developing, accessing, and using knowledge and technology for equitable agricultural and rural system innovation.

These findings raise important questions on how public research efforts should reorient themselves.