Research Into Use *sharing lessons to enable innovation in agriculture*

RIU Malawi, Africa Country Programme
Annual report, 2009-2010

Legumes platform
Establishing a functional legumes seed supply system in Malawi

i. Why are you working on/facilitating this innovation experience?

Grain legumes are an important component of Malawi's maize-based farming systems. Legumes are particularly a cheap source of vegetable proteins and vitamins in addition to their contribution to soil fertility improvement through fixation of atmospheric nitrogen into the soil. Despite these benefits, the grain legumes sub sector is characterized by very low productivity due, among others, to the fact that many farmers experience serious problems in accessing seed of legumes crops at planting time. The rationale therefore is that increased productivity in the grain legume sub sector can be realized if farmers can have access to sufficient quantities of seed of desirable improved varieties. This realization demanded some coordinated and consulted efforts by various partners in the legume industry to address this observed bottleneck. The focus being using the innovation systems approach to increase farmers' access to and use of research results for addressing production and marketing bottlenecks in the legume value chain.

ii. What is your role (what do you mainly do) and how has this changed development(s)?

The role of RIU in this initiative is mainly to facilitate the bringing together of all stakeholders in the legumes sub-sector value chain to discuss the bottlenecks and opportunities allowing for development of synergies such that communication and business practices are improved; coordinating various institutional efforts towards addressing the identified priorities - for example bringing in the private farms to multiply legume seed under irrigation; brokering linkages between farmer groups and breeders and seed services scientists for the participation of farmers in multiplying breeder and basic seed; providing grant funds to the platform and coordinating the unblocking of identified bottlenecks; empowering the farmers group – Association of Smallholder farmers Seed Multiplication Action Group (ASSMAG) through training so that it becomes an effective partner of the legumes platform.

iii. What is driving the innovation (market, project, policy change, etc)?

This is a poor-user driven innovation – establishing functional seed supply systems and exploring patterns of partnerships to make it commercially viable for the benefit of the poor rural farmers.

iv. What forms of partnership are involved and what is their significance in respect of the outcomes thus far?

The partnerships are in form of facilitated joint meetings to review and plan together the activities of the platform; task forces have been established to look into specific technical issues identified in the platform.

v. What is different/special about the way partners interact and how is this evolving over time?

This arrangement has enhanced the communication and direct intensive interaction between researchers (breeders and seed technologists) with farmers. There is increased interest of the private sector companies such as Farmers World because the platform issues are in line with its business interests of seed multiplication.

vi. Are there any special ways of working required/evolving that will allow the innovation to be achieved?

The platform is engaging the participation of various stakeholders (farmers and private sector) in the multiplication of legumes seed using a revolving fund approach. This will enable the platform to continue supporting other initiatives even after the phase out of grant support from RIU.

vii. Who are the key players and why are they important – and how are key players and their respective roles evolving?

The key partners in the legume sub-sector include, research (CGIAR, NARS and academia); government extension services; NGOs; farmer organizations; input suppliers; seed private sector and grain traders/processors.

viii. Is there an innovation champion or coordinator?

There is an innovation champion elected by the platform members.

ix. What strategies are in place to link local innovation activities to the wider economic and policy environment?

There is the National Innovation Coalition (NIC) that acts as platform for leveraging policy advocacy with government. The platform representative from the Ministry of Agriculture is the national coordinator of grain legumes research in Malawi hence is pivotal in providing government policy support. The platform champion is a member of the Legumes Task Force commissioned by government to strategize the legumes sector under the Agriculture Input Subsidy programme of government of Malawi.

x. What strategies are used to ensure inclusiveness of stakeholders and opinions – particularly the poor?

There are lined up capacity building activities to empower Association of Smallholder farmers Seed Multiplication Action Group (ASSMAG), a farmer based organization with the aim of ensuring that farmers become effective partners in the platform and are able to demand for information and services; there is production of simplified communication messages targeting the rural poor farmers on grain legumes production and marketing.

xi. What have been the unexpected outcomes thus far, and what was/is their significance?

Unexpected outcomes: The decision by government to allow farmers to also participate in multiplication of legumes breeder seed -this is the first of its kind in Malawi. All along, farmers have only been allowed to multiply maize breeder seeds. This consideration by government will therefore help in increasing availability of grain legumes seed of improved varieties for use by farmers.

xii. What strategies/mechanisms are used to learn, adjust and refocus during the innovation experience?

There are quarterly platform meetings where members review progress and share experiences; platforms also document and produce quarterly reports capturing progress, successes, challenges and lessons learned.

xiii. What have been the main lessons learned thus far and how has this influenced your way of working and the innovation experience?

There are many challenges in legume seed multiplication compared to other grain legumes like maize and this requires more consulted efforts in driving the innovation.

xiv. To what extent is the innovation experience influenced by/ dependent upon the political environment and how are you dealing with this?

The government of Malawi has also included the grain legumes in the input subsidy distribution programme hence there is expected need to increase supply/availability of legumes seeds.

xv. What new skills and knowledge are emerging as a result of your work?

Association of Smallholder farmers Seed Multiplication Action Group have been trained in seed production techniques of beans, soya beans and groundnuts.

xvi. What indicators quantify the social and economic changes occurring through your activities in this innovation experience?

Indicators: Increased access by farmers to grain legumes seeds of improved varieties for increased production and incomes.

xvii. Formulate a statement that builds plausible connections between your activities and the indicators identified under (xvi), to substantiate – in hard figures – the scale of the impact, and indicate how you expect this to evolve over time.

It is expected that 28 tons of legume seed (beans, soya beans and groundnuts) of new released varieties will be produced benefiting around 7,000 farmers by end of 2010.