

Resourcing farmer-led innovation

Presentation to the GFAR Constituent Assembly (24-26 August 2015) from one of the original GFAR Global Partnership Programmes: PROLINNOVA.

Prolinnova is an international multi-stakeholder network that was catalysed by the GFAR. It was conceived by civil society organisations, presented at the first GFAR meeting in Germany in 2000, and continues to thrive to this day with limited funding. It persists because it is, in essence, a **social movement** carried by people committed to ecologically oriented agriculture who seek to enhance local innovative capacities of small-scale farmers (understood in a wide sense of the word).

The PROLINNOVA network sees grassroots innovation as being central to agricultural innovation systems. Local innovation can stimulate **bottom-up collective action in development**. The entire PROLINNOVA network is built from below, where multi-stakeholder groups in now over 20 countries determine what is done not only at their country level but at international level to support their own efforts. They elect their own international governance group to oversee the network's activities – and four of the Oversight Group members are here in this room. We try to engage at global level in discussions like this Constituent Assembly and other international meetings, based on the experience of the partners working in agriculture at the grassroots – in short, working from local to global level.

PROLINNOVA seeks to identify local innovation by farmers – women, men, young and old – and to build on this to engage other actors (researchers, development agents, private sector etc) in **farmer-led research**. The idea is to link formal research and knowledge systems with the immense local knowledge, creativity and motivation for agricultural development in smallholder farming communities.

The PROLINNOVA network recognised that governments and donors normally provide funds for agricultural research and innovation only to formal government institutions in which farmers and other members of civil society have no effective influence on deciding how the funds will be used. Also civil society members in the donor countries who are paying for agricultural research and development through their taxes have little influence on deciding how the funds are used – but I'll come to that later. Even when using participatory approaches, formal researchers are usually answering their own questions and testing their own technologies. Where this is based on a good knowledge of smallholder farming, it is perfectly justified. But in small-scale farming under highly diverse conditions, there is also need for more **decentralised research**, answering local farmers' questions and enhancing local capacity to generate or adapt site-appropriate solutions.

That's why we tested a **mechanism for resourcing grassroots innovation**: Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs) which are made available directly to rural communities. Local Fund Management Committees – composed sometimes only of farmers, sometimes also with local government and development agents – decide on the topics of research, how it will be carried out

and who will do it. The Committees call for proposals from farmers and farmer groups based on local innovations and ideas, and allocate grants to the proposals of top priority in their locality, especially with a view to the **needs of the majority of resource-poor farmers**. The resources are channelled to the selected farmer researchers, sometimes in groups working together with other actors in the innovation system. The farmer researchers agree from the outset to share their findings in the community, as they are using **public funds to produce public goods**.

An **impact assessment** of this approach tested in 8 countries in Africa and Asia revealed that it:

- strengthened farmer self-organisation around handling funds for innovation and learning,
- built the capacities of small-scale farmers (including women) to formulate their own research needs and to access relevant information,
- increased their confidence to interact with “outsiders” in joint innovation, and
- stimulated many development agents and some scientists to recognise and support local innovation.

The LISFs were piloted with funding from the French and Dutch governments and the Rockefeller Foundation, but it proved difficult to **tap sources of funding** in the 8 countries. Some local committees tried to keep the LISF going by asking for partial repayments from the experimenting farmers who received grants, but the question arose: why do formal researchers not also have to repay part of the funds they receive for their work? The farmer researchers are working for the community, and public funds should be available for local learning and production of research results as local public goods. In the current situation of **decentralising government budgets** to district or county level in many countries, local Fund Committees are now trying to access part of such decentralised resources to support farmer-led research.

We see the LISF as a complementary funding mechanism that gives communities direct access to resources for research and innovation according to local priorities. It is not something to be made available primarily by international sources of funding but from strengthened national and subnational research and innovation systems and governments that recognise the important role of enhancing local experimentation, innovation and adaptation.

Another new pathway we are also exploring is the possibility of **crowdfunding** to support farmer-led innovation processes. We believe there are many people in the world who would like to support locally driven agricultural research and innovation – in their own countries or in developing countries – and are unsure whether the governments using their tax money or the private sector with its profit motive are making interventions in agricultural research and innovation that truly benefit small-scale family farmers. The immense opportunities offered by the Web make it possible for the man and woman in the street – with their computers or phones – to make their own decisions about contributing to agricultural research and innovation – so crowdfunding for decentralised research is also something we could discuss here and one of several possible and complementary ways to resource agricultural innovation in the globe.

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