Facilitating Innovation

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Background

The international consensus was that productivity growth requires a smooth flow of ‘innovations’ from science to ‘ultimate users’. That consensus is shifting to other pathways. One is Innovation Systems: innovation emerges from interaction among diverse but complementary actors in an agricultural domain. Their concerted action can create and interlink the services and conditions that provide realistic opportunity. When the mix is right (when they have voice and access to e.g., credit, inputs, technology, marketing and rights) farmers participate in modern markets. Extension becomes effective when it is part of, or even brokers, the mix and helps actors capture opportunity.

Sustainable intensification of smallholder farming is a serious option for global food security. That option is more resource-efficient than further intensification of industrial agriculture. Researchers agree on a pervasive bias against smallholders in Sub-Saharan Africa. When it comes to commercial food production, they face very small windows of opportunity. Innovation platforms on which key actors agree to establish enabling conditions for categories of smallholders are an option. Facilitating them is a role for extension.

Description

FARA’s SSA Challenge Programme experiments with Innovation Platforms to establish proof of principle. In eight domains in Benin, Ghana and Mali, CoS-SIS experiments with Concertation and Innovation Groups (CIGs) to identify effective mechanisms. CoS-SIS invested a year in scoping and diagnosis of each domain to link farmers’ felt constraints to attributes of the institutional context (i.e. values, norms, rules, agreements, governance and practices that determine opportunity) and identify actors who could make a difference. This led to entry points for promising techno-institutional change. The Programme hired part-time post-doc staff from national academic and research organisations to create and facilitate CIGs around these entry points. The CIGs engage in institutional experiments to realise the opportunities identified. Although the outcomes of the experiments will not be measured until the end of 2013, useful lessons about facilitation emerge.

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Lessons learned

Although the nature of institutions seem to explain a large proportion of the variance in the quality and quantity of SSA’s agricultural output, its research and academic organisations have little social science capacity to analyse or change them.

Effective CIGs are based on information about institutions that explain smallholder constraints, about networks and actors that perpetuate them, and about ‘champions’ who want change. Facilitation must be grounded in intelligence gathering until smallholders become effective in articulating their needs and their organizations have clout to oppose powerful interests.

The facilitators CoS-SIS recruited all have a technical background. Understanding institutions was latent, although most knew well how ‘politics’ affect outcomes. Training in value chains proved useful: the concept is familiar and notions such as integration, synergy, interdependence, system, network, etc., become easy. Yet it took time to start up the CIGs and further workshops were necessary to explain institutions, CIGs, visions, and facilitation. Many initially engaged CIGs in regular development activities. After three years, the facilitators, even if part-time, function satisfactorily. Mobile phones prove an important facilitation tool. Imposing programme goals lost people, helping them grow brought them in.

The CIGs have a variable composition of farmers’ representatives, government officials, district administrators, researchers, extensionists, NGOs and some commercial companies. Initially many facilitators created village level CIGs. But institutional change requires action at higher than local level. Effective CIGs have members who can affect policy making. Otherwise CIG experiments change niches but not regimes.

One facilitator defined CIGs as ‘impermanent platforms for interaction among actors who seem able to make key contributions to innovation with respect to the entry point’. Their composition shifts as understanding grows and issues change. CIGs were not expected to have a formal structure but some appointed chairmen and secretaries.

It took some effort to motivate people to participate (only costs of attending are paid). The sizeable CoS-SIS funds earmarked for CIG experiments remained under-spent. Changing institutions does not cost much. It is important to invest in interaction. Many donors and governments seem reluctant to do so.

Ensuring that all CIG members, and especially farmers, participate is important. Government officials and businessmen easily become dominant. Independence and clout are characteristics of an effective facilitator. Smallholder CIG members are best elected by empowered farmer/women’s groups.

Hurdles and challenges

Institutional change can threaten interests and create enemies. It is important to embed CIG facilitation in political will. Intelligence gathering can identify uncontroversial low hanging fruits and easy wins. An experimental pilot program pays off when scaled up or replicated. Although it is early days, some CIGs seem to function on their own. It is as yet unclear whether the networks the program is creating can initiate and sustain CIG facilitation. There is a great deal of recognition and support for institutional change, but many decision makers do not believe in smallholder development as a path to food security and opt for foreign direct investment.

Village extension workers can facilitate local platforms to formulate key constraints rooted in the institutional context. But analysing that context and facilitating CIGs at higher levels to change it requires rethinking extension roles in ministries, NGOs, companies and farmers’ organisations.

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