

What are innovation platforms?

Innovation platforms practice brief 1



RESEARCH
PROGRAM ON
Integrated Systems
for the Humid
Tropics

Innovation platforms are widely used in agricultural research to connect different stakeholders to achieve common goals. This is one of 12 'practice briefs' to help guide agricultural research practitioners who seek to support and implement innovation platforms. A contribution to the CGIAR Humidtropics research program, the development of the briefs was led by the International Livestock Research Institute; they draw on experiences of the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food, several CGIAR centres and partner organizations.

Innovation platforms are a way to bring together different stakeholders to identify solutions to common problems or to achieve a common goal. They ensure that different interests are taken into account, and various groups contribute to finding solutions. Used by the private sector for many years to gather information and improve networking among key stakeholders in a particular economic sector, they caught the attention of development agencies at the end of the 1980s. They are now increasingly common in research and development initiatives.

But innovation platforms can be difficult and time-consuming, so must be used with care. This brief explains what innovation platforms are and how they work, and it describes some of their advantages and limitations. It is one of a series of briefs on innovation platforms; the other briefs in the series go into detail on specific aspects of the approach.

Space for learning and change

An innovation platform is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, agricultural input suppliers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials, etc. The members come together to develop a common vision and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a group or coordinate activities by individual members. Individual members can also innovate alone, spurred by the coordinated group activities.

Innovation platforms may tackle challenges and opportunities at various levels: in a village or community, in a district or nationwide, or throughout a value chain or economic sector. They may work at a single level, or across several levels.

Innovation platforms are particularly useful in agriculture because agricultural issues tend to be complex. These issues involve different biophysical, socioeconomic and political factors, and concern various formal and informal institutions. By bringing together stakeholders in various sectors and from different levels, innovation platforms may be able to identify and address these issues more effectively than other approaches.

Within agriculture, innovation platforms can be useful to explore strategies that can boost productivity, manage natural resources, improve value chains, and adapt to climate change. Some innovation platforms focus on single issues; others are broader and deal with multiple topics.

Definitions

Innovation platform

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.

Who uses innovation platforms?

Various types of organizations use innovation platforms:

- **Agricultural research organizations** use innovation platforms to help make their research more relevant and to facilitate the adaptation and dissemination of findings. They force researchers to look beyond their own disciplinary or commodity boundaries and consider the whole picture (Brief 3).
- **Development agencies** and NGOs find them useful to identify areas for interventions, to ensure that the interventions are appropriate for particular situations, and to enable stakeholders to influence policymaking and development activities (Brief 12).
- **Local and national governments** use them to improve policymaking, links with clients, and their outreach services for citizens (Brief 2).
- **Donors** regard innovation platforms as a way to improve the targeting and effectiveness of development interventions. While they may sponsor innovation platforms, they are not normally members themselves.

The following stakeholders are crucial members of innovation platforms:

- **Farmers** and other rural people use innovation groups to express their interests and guide activities that are intended to benefit them.
- **The private sector**, including traders, input suppliers, service providers, processors, wholesalers and retailers, can benefit from innovation platforms that aim to boost economic activities and make value chains more efficient and profitable.

Examples of innovation platforms in agricultural research and development

The **Consortium for Sustainable Development of the Andean Eco-region** (www.condesan.org) uses innovation platforms to address issues in natural resource management. They engage local actors to discuss how to share benefits and resolve conflicts.

In a Fodder Adoption Project, the **International Livestock Research Institute** (fodderadoption.wordpress.com/tag/fap) used innovation platforms in Ethiopia to improve livestock feeding. Through platform discussions, the project's initial narrow focus on feed broadened to include the procurement of improved crossbred cows, new milk transportation arrangements, and the establishment of a dairy cooperative. Innovation platforms are also used in several other projects notably the Nile Basin Development Challenge (<http://nilebdc.org>), and the imGoats (<http://imgoats.org>) and PROGEBE (<http://cgspace.cgiar.org/handle/10568/27871>) projects.

In southern Africa, the **International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics** (www.icrisat.org) used innovation platforms to improve the production and marketing of goats. They helped lower transaction costs in the value chain, meant that farmers could make a bigger profit, and ensured that the market guides investments in goat production.

The **Convergence of Science – Strengthening Innovation Systems** programme (www.cos-sis.org) used innovation platforms in West Africa to improve smallholder agriculture. The platforms studied bottlenecks in production systems and induced institutional changes in value chains and policymaking.

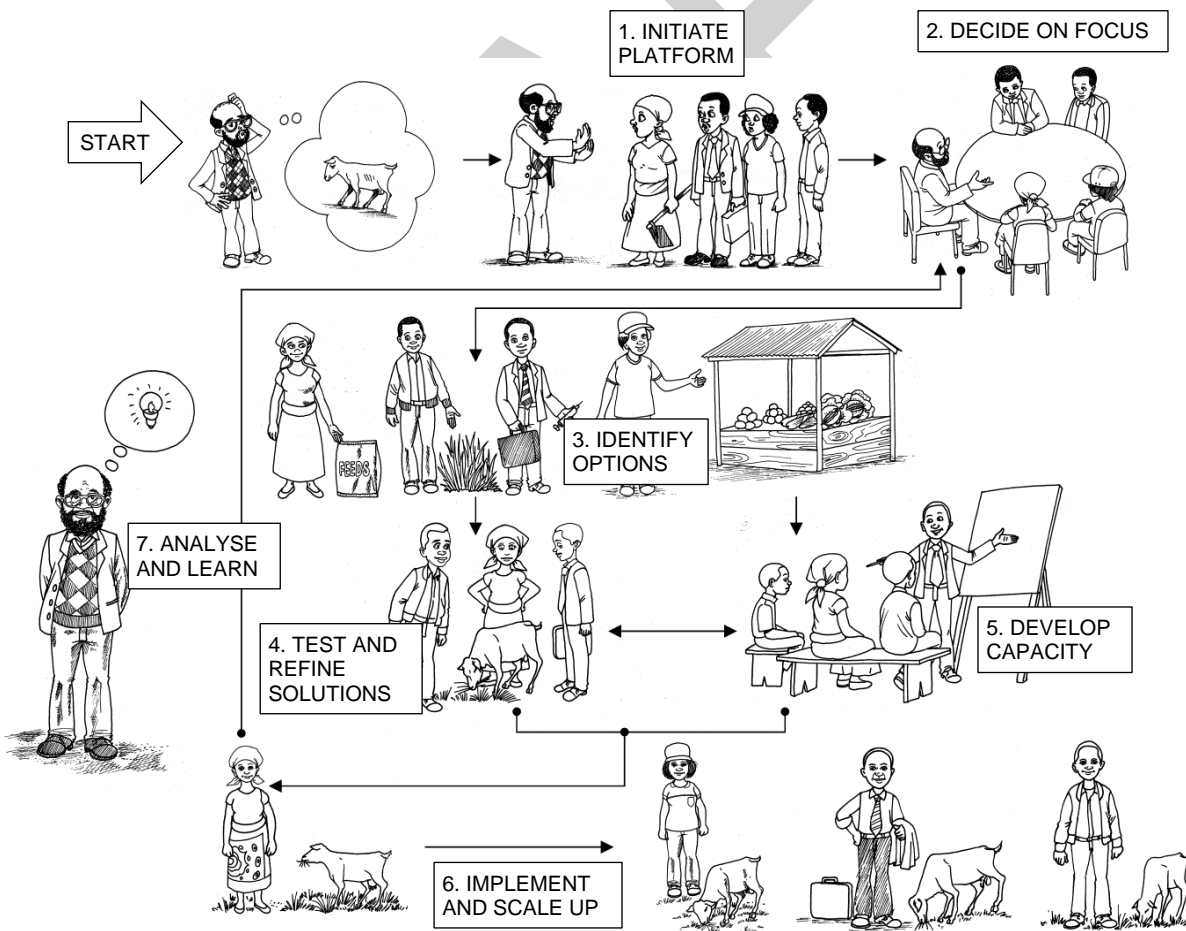
The **International Center for Tropical Agriculture** and its partners (www.alianzasdeaprendizaje.org) developed a regional “learning alliance” in Central America to improve market access for farmers through collaborative innovation.

The **Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa** (www.fara-africa.org) promotes the use of innovation platforms in integrated agricultural research for development programmes that target productivity, markets, natural resource management and policy issues.

How innovation platforms work

While they may be flexible, innovation platforms generally follow a series of steps.

1. **Initiate.** Any stakeholder group can initiate innovation platforms, but it is usually a research or development organization, a government agency or an NGO that does so. This organization identifies the broad focus area of the innovation platform, identifies the various stakeholders, brings them together, and convenes the first few meetings. It identifies someone to facilitate the innovation platform: perhaps one of its own staff, or someone else from outside (Brief 10).
2. **Decide on focus.** The platform members discuss the focus area and identify bottlenecks, problems and opportunities.
3. **Identify options.** The platform members decide what they want to do to solve the problems or take advantage of the opportunities that they have identified. The range of options may be wide. For example, they may decide to test new varieties of a crop, explore ways to improve supplies of inputs, promote the marketing of a product, or press for a change in government policy (Briefs 3 and 6).
4. **Test and refine solutions.** Solutions must be tested and adapted to make sure they work. Farmers may test new farming



Innovation platforms tend to follow a seven-step cycle

methods; traders may try offering more for higher grades of produce; an input supplier may test-market a new type of product. The innovation may be a new technology (a new type of seed or farming technique), or an institutional change (a policy adjustment or a new way to manage marketing). The innovation platform coordinates these experiments and monitors whether they are successful (Briefs 3 and 5).

5. **Develop capacity.** In most cases, it is necessary to develop the capacity of different actors in order for the solutions to succeed. Farmers may need training in a new technique; cooperatives may need help with organization and bookkeeping; new ways may be needed to multiply and distribute seed or to manage the marketing of produce. The innovation platform identifies these needs and finds ways to develop the capacity required (Practice Brief 8).
6. **Implement and scale up.** If the innovation is successful, the innovation platform works with its member groups to get it adopted widely. That may mean documenting and publicizing the innovation, arranging training and study visits, persuading other groups to adopt it, etc. (Briefs 7 and 9)
7. **Analyse and learn.** Learning what has succeeded and what has not is an important part of innovation platforms, especially those with a research focus. This information is fed back to the platform members so they can identify further changes that need to be made (Briefs 3, 5, 8, 10 and 12).

Different words, same idea

- Concertation and innovation group
- Innovation network
- Innovation coalition
- Innovation configuration
- Multi-stakeholder platform
- Association interprofessionnelle (French)
- Plataforma de inovação (Portuguese)

Related approaches

- **Public-private partnerships.** These may focus on developing technologies such as hybrid maize and bio-tech together with industry. **But** they may neglect stakeholders such as farmers and government.
- **Participatory research.** This is useful to adapt technologies to farm conditions. **But** it may fail to consider outside constraints, such as issues or bottlenecks in the value chain.
- **Learning alliances.** These enable groups of farmers or traders to work together and learn from each other. **But** they rarely bring in other perspectives.

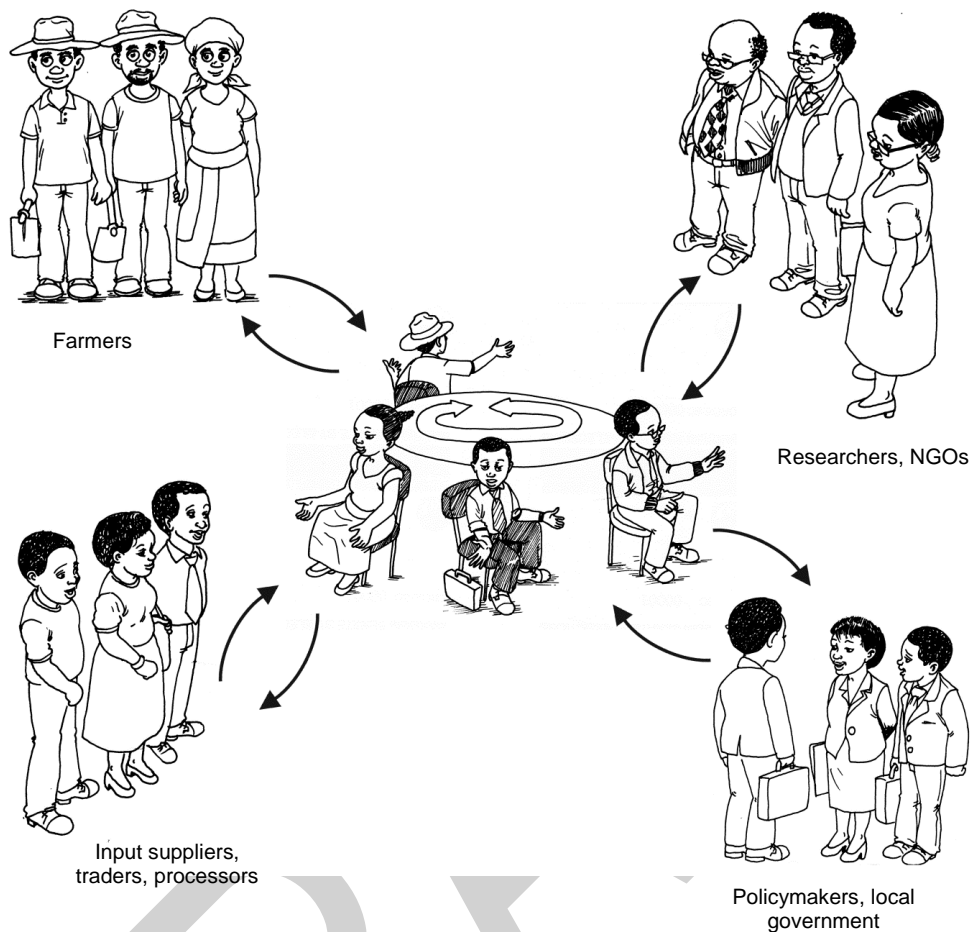
Dynamic processes

Innovation platforms are a systematic attempt to facilitate change through joint action. While they are structured, they are also flexible, changing in response to the current situation.

Changing focus. As problems are solved and new issues emerge, the activities and focus of an innovation platform may change over time. It is the platform members who decide.

Changing membership. The membership of an innovation platform may change over time as needs arise. The platform may invite new members to join: for example, a platform focusing on agriculture may invite someone with expertise in water to join if this emerges as a key issue in farm production. A platform could bring in outsiders on a short-term or one-off basis to provide information or advice.

Changing responsibilities. The management of the innovation platform may shift over time from the initiating organization to one or more of the members. For example, a farmer organization or government agency may take over responsibility for coordinating the platform.



Temporary or permanent? Innovation platforms may be temporary: they exist only as long as necessary to solve a problem. Or they may be extended as new issues and opportunities emerge. If so, it is necessary to find ways to fund the platform and its activities after initial project funding ends.

Links to other bodies. The members of an innovation platform provide vital links to the organizations or groups they represent. Each member represents his or her organization, and is expected to communicate the platform's suggestions and activities back to his or her peers.

Linking innovation platforms. Some problems cannot be addressed at one level: a district-level platform may identify a policy that needs to be changed at a national level. It may be useful to form innovation platforms at several levels (community, district, national) to address problems at each one. Innovation platforms at each level should be linked to feed ideas and information (Brief 9).

Benefits of innovation platforms

Strengths of innovation platforms include:

- They facilitate **dialogue and understanding** among stakeholders and provide a space for them to create a common vision and mutual trust. They offer a neutral space to air disagreements and conflicts, and for members to state their needs and requirements (Brief 4).
- They enable partners to identify the **bottlenecks** hindering innovation, and develop **solutions** beyond what individual actors can achieve alone, for example in infrastructure, institutional change and policy development (Brief 2).
- They create **motivation and a feeling of ownership** of the solutions that they develop: People readily buy into solutions they have been involved in developing.

- They facilitate **upward communication**. They enable weaker actors (such as small-scale farmers) to express their views on an equal basis with powerful actors (such as processors or the government). They empower communities to demand and negotiate for services from the government and support organizations.
- They lead to **better-informed decisions**. Innovation platforms enable joint learning and cooperation among diverse actors to solve problems and reduce uncertainties. Farmers can learn how to sell their products; policymakers gain evidence to use in creating a more enabling environment where innovations can happen.
- They contribute to **capacity development**. By improving communication, learning and exposure to new people and ideas, innovation platforms help members to clarify their roles, organize themselves, and adapt to unforeseen changes and new opportunities (Briefs 7 and 8).
- They make **innovative research** possible. Innovation platforms create opportunities for research to be demand-driven, to find critical issues for investigation, and to disseminate research outputs. Platform members are involved in the research process, and are more likely to be convinced by the findings (Brief 3).
- They enhance **impact**. Farmers can improve their agricultural productivity and profitability and improve how they manage natural resources. Value chain actors can engage more effectively in the market. Policymaking can be more participatory and appropriate for solving issues on the ground (Brief 12).

Constraints

Nevertheless, innovation platforms are not the solution to all problems. Because they are not rigid or predictable, they can lead a research or development programme in unexpected directions (which may be a good thing, but can be hard to justify to senior managers and donors).

Depending on the circumstances, other approaches, such as more traditional research coordination meetings, stakeholder consultations, or participatory research methods, may be more appropriate. All these methods can be used in conjunction with innovation platforms.

- Progress and success depends on **full buy-in of the members**. Members have to be willing to work together and trust each other. Social and institutional conflicts, lack of political will, and power structures can hinder the innovation platform to grow (Brief 4).
- Innovation platforms can be **difficult and costly** to implement. They require a range of facilitation and research expertise – which may not be available. The costs of fostering partnerships should be seen as an investment – requiring a long-term perspective (Brief 10).
- They require a **long-term perspective**: engaging actors and developing relationships take time. Necessary investments in infrastructure and policies are often long-term. Achieving visible outputs may take longer than a project allows.
- It can be **difficult to monitor and evaluate innovation platforms** in a systematic way. Their outcomes depend on many factors, and many other factors may intervene to reinforce or mask their effects (Brief 5).
- **Shortcuts are risky**. Developing and promoting innovation require systems thinking, including technical as well as institutional innovations and policy adaptations. There is a danger of regarding innovation platforms merely as forums to transfer and disseminate technology.
- **Tangible outputs** are needed to sustain the members' interest and commitment to the innovation process. Without them, they may lose interest.

Sustainability

How to ensure sustainability of the process? Often the platform itself does not have to be sustainable! Once capacity for innovation (Brief 8) is established within the system, the platform itself may not be required. It may be useful for certain types of platforms, such as higher-level policy-oriented platforms, or those that facilitate information exchange, to be sustained over time. Funding and support for such platforms needs to be found.

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