Hybrid session organized at the 10th TAP Partners Assembly

How investing in multi-actor facilities that strengthen functional capacities accelerates innovations in key sectors in Ethiopia

Experience and lessons learnt from DeSIRA projects in Ethiopia

Organized by DeSIRA-LIFT and DeSIRA implementers intervening in Ethiopia

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Multi-stakeholder innovation facilities promoted by DeSIRA projects: opportunities, advantages and managerial challenges

1. Rationale

Farmers, agri-business and service providers have to innovate continuously to adapt to an ever-changing environment that responds to tresses caused by climate change, diminishing natural resources, or evolving markets. Overcoming these challenges require collaboration, and resource and sharing ideas and practices through the action of multi-stakeholder innovation facilities (MIFs). These are arrangements of various kinds where the different actors come together to discuss, work towards a common goal, and gain knowledge from each other. These MIFs have received several names: platforms, mechanisms, or networks. Regardless of the name, something is certain: these MIFs are key to achieving innovation that benefit farmers, and other local entrepreneurs.

These MIFs are increasingly viewed as entities of learning and innovation immersed in the Agriculture Innovation Systems (AIS) where innovation is considered the result of a process of networking and interactive learning among a heterogeneous set of actors, such as farmers, input industries, processors, traders, researchers, extensionists, government officials, and civil society organizations.

The implementation of MIFs is one of the strategies utilized by the DeSIRA Projects to attain their complex goals, often working in complicated environments, as opposite to collaborations that tend to occur ad hoc, limited to peer-to-peer partnerships, and constrained by siloed mentalities.

In November 2023, DeSIRA LIFT invited representatives of five DeSIRA projects to share their experiences implementing and supporting MIFs, at the 10th Tropical Agriculture Platform Assembly in Addis Ababa. The speakers came from a wide range of agriculture and development organizations with a strong trajectory promoting innovation processes in Africa. The working session had three main objectives:

- To discuss the models used that these organizations utilize to strengthen not only technical but also functional capacities to achieve their goals.
- To analyse to what extent the multiactor innovation mechanisms contribute to behavior or policy changes.
- Demonstrate the significance of implementing these models and approaches to advance the TAP agenda.

Here, we present the five cases of MIFs implemented under DeSIRA projects to achieve innovation in East Africa, the key elements of the discussion held at TAP, and some key lessons for future actions.

2. Inputs from the projects

Yayu Coffee: improving smallholders livelihoods while conserving the coffee forest ecosystems

The Yayu DeSIRA Project is implemented in the UNESCO-registered Yayu Coffee Forest Biosphere Reserve in Ethiopia -the global biodiversity hotspot Eastern Afromontane Forest region, and headwater region. The project aims at improving the livelihoods of smallholders and conserving the coffee forest ecosystems through climate relevant and integrated landscape management.

The project is carried out by a MIF comprised of six partner organizations: Hanns R. Neumann Stiftung (HRNS, project lead), Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority (ECTA), Jimma Agricultural Research Center (JARC), Population Health and Environment Ethiopia Consortium (PHE-EC), Environment and Coffee Forest Forum (ECFF), and International Coffee Partners (ICP). The diverse implementer partners come together to address a multitude of challenges: (1) at the institutional level there is weak governance, limited institutional capacity, and lack of coordination; (2) at the ecosystems level there is increased deforestation and degradation, biodiversity loss, low productivity and quality, climate change impacts and lack of market recognition.

Most project investments are directed towards benefitting the local communities through capacity enhancements such as skill training, institutional support, and provision of materials and inputs. The communities are reached through formalized farmers' organization such as coffee cooperatives, Farmers Field School groups, women and youth groups, using community facilitators and change agents. Field extension workers called development agents, based in the communities, support this work and contribute to strengthen functional capacities of local partners.

https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/desira/info/yayu-coffee-forest-ethiopia_en

Women Coffee Climate: the EthioLatinCoffee platform

The general objective of the project is to enhance gender equality and sustainability of Ethiopian coffee value chain through eco-efficiency, social innovation, and south–south cooperation.

The project uses a MIF called the EthioLatinCoffee community of practice (CoP), which is organized by various institutions linking Ethiopia, Colombia, Honduras and Spain: the Spansih Cooperation (AECID), Ethiopian Coffee and Tea Authority (ECTA), Ethiopian Forestry Development (EFD), Jimma Agricultural Research Center, (JARC), Ethiopian Women in Coffee (EWiC) and Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA) from Ethiopia; CONACAFE from Honduras and TECNICAFE from Colombia. The goal of the EthioLatonCoffee Community of Practice is to promote collaboration and innovation in the coffee sector while addressing important issues like women empowerment and climate resilience.

The project has used a set of tools to understand and address the key problems faced by the communities that depend on coffee production and trade for their livelihoods, which include needs assessment, stakeholder mapping, implementing an operational governance structure, coordination and communication, and knowledge management. By systematically addressing these points, it is ensured that functional capacities are in place to run the EthioLatinCoffee platform efficiently, while it helped to contribute to the success and sustainability of the initiative.

https://capacity4dev.europa.eu/projects/desira/info/women-coffee-climate_en

Land, soil-, crop information systems (LSC-IS)

LSC-IS is implemented by a MIF comprised of Wageningen University and Research (WUR), ISRIC World Soil Information and International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI). Other partners include World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA). The project is implemented in Ethiopia, Kenya and Rwanda in collaboration with the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR), Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO) and Rwanda Agriculture and Animal Resources Development Board (RAB).

LSC-IS works out MIF to co-design and sustain the land soil crop information hubs in the national participating agricultural research organizations to enhance the effectiveness of national Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS). Land, soil and crop data from many sources are consolidated into these data portals (hubs) where it is stored, processed and visualized. Operating at the national, district and local levels, it uses the AKIS concept to define stakeholder groups and includes government, private sector, NGOs/academia, farmers' organizations and individual farmers as stakeholder groups. It involves intermediaries such as extension services for last mile delivery to end users, aiming at building ownership with producers and users of the hub data and services.

In terms of strengthening functional capacities, the project uses a staged approach involving stakeholders groups in several steps: (1) needs assessment, (2) awareness raising and training, (3) feedback and co-development, (4) further training and application of hub services, and (4) develop sustainability plans, including embedding the use of LSC-IS information services in business plans of stakeholder groups, developing partnership between users and hub hosts, and practical mechanisms for scaling.

https://lsc-hubs.org/

WATDEV: **Climate Smart Water Management and Sustainable Development for Food and Agriculture in East Africa**

WATDEV collects, analyses, and implements available best management practices (BMP) and innovations and models their impact scenarios in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Sudan. The project integrates knowledge already present from recent and ongoing research projects, related databases, modelling tools, technologies, and operational frameworks.

WATDEV puts in place a multi-actor process linking together farmers, researchers and policy-makers. The project implements needs-based research with the involvement of local farmers in:

1 *Evaluation of local community needs*: aims at evaluating the group needs, by domain of application of BMPs, to produce changes;
2 *Group evaluation*: it aims to qualitatively assess the community, describing the ability to collaborate and work together, the inclusiveness, group consistency, and cohesion in performing

new processes and activities, and the group's ability to share the individual benefit with the whole community.

The project is organized into five components: (1) Best fitting BMPs and innovations selected by 4 countries, (2) Enhanced implementation of BMPs and innovations in study areas, (3) BMPs and innovations upscale and outscale scenarios performed, (4) A water planning/management toolbox available for researchers and institutions, and (5) Strengthened knowledge, capacity building and established regional "Water Knowledge Hub".

Site-specific *Brokerage meetings* were held in the four countries, organized by local partners Heliopolis University (HU) in Egypt, KALRO, Water and Land Resources Center (WLRC) in Ethiopia, and Water Research Centre (WRC), Sudan, in close collaboration with ASARECA, engaging several local actors and farmers, where they debated on applied practices, needs, and willingness to adopt innovations. A *multi-actor regional meeting*, involving leading universities and research institutes, national and local public authorities, and value chain extension services from the four WATDEV countries attended. WATDEV also implements *Training and Capacity Building activities* to support to local actors in effectively implementing the selected BMPs and innovations in their respective territories and communities. WATDEV also fosters a *policy dialogue* with the main EU countries' donors operating in East Africa, particularly in the WATDEV countries, to mainstream their activities to avoid duplication and enhance complementarities.

https://www.watdev.eu/

Coalition of the Willing (CoW) as an innovative platform

Despite the existence of a high volume of soil and agronomy data in Ethiopia accumulated over six decades, these data are not findable, accessible and reusable. Awareness of data access and sharing systems following the FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable, and reusable) data principles was limited. Consequently, whoever had a research question had to generate fresh data, which is time and resource-consuming. To address the issue, concerned individuals and groups like the Ethiopian Society of Soil Sciences attempted to influence the government to create a central database system to manage soil and agronomy data, but without success. The efforts continued unabated aiming at demonstrating the value of big data analytics and creating awareness of the need for data access and sharing. The discussions to support a systematic and institutionalized process of soil and agronomy data sharing and access culminated with the birth of the Coalition of the Willing (CoW) to which about 30 individuals initially subscribed. Nowadays, the CoW embraces over 150 individuals and institutes.

The CoW passed through different processes and registered remarkable achievements including:

1. Developed internal data-sharing guidelines
2. Mapped the soil and agronomy data ecosystem
3. Gathered and harmonized tens of thousands of soil and agronomy data
4. Created two data portals, one at the Ministry of Agriculture and another at the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research
5. Facilitated the development and approval of Soil and Agronomy data sharing and management directives (registered by the Ministry of Justice)
6. Capacity building for hundreds of research and extension staff and published over 10 journal articles
7. Development of site-specific fertilizer decision support tool (DST) using a Machine Learning approach
8. Developed a high-resolution soil resource map of Ethiopia
9. Published and mainstreamed 3 data standardization guidelines in the national research system

Important success factors of the CoW include committed facilitation, focusing on end goal and flexibility in approaches- including in funding, innovative incentive mechanisms and patience with slow partners. Currently, different projects and donors have shown interest in supporting the process and scaling the approach, including the EU through funding the projects PRO-SOIL and PROSILIENCE.

http://ethioagridata.com/products.html

3. The discussion: common elements, lessons learned and the way forward

Innovation is about putting ideas that are new to a certain location into practice, and in this way changing the situation of those living in this area for the better. This process normally entails the collective action of multiple actors that must collaborate and co-create, immersed in time and resource-bound projects that build on a trajectory of actions and outcomes that need to be constantly monitored and shared.

How do DeSIRA projects use MIFs to enable strategic collaborations and empowerment of the right stakeholders, including not only strengthening ***technical but also functional capacities to achieve their goals?***

There is a diversity of MIFs in DeSIRA projects, based on their functions and the level at which they operate, playing different roles in the innovation scaling strategy. At least three types of actors were observed in these MIFs, each with a particular role: 1) promoting organizations usually from the public or development sector that convenes and designs the MIF structure, functioning as a bridge, 2) a beneficiary or target group(s), who are directly affected by the problem and will make use or benefit from the practices, research results, or innovations generated in the project, and 3) a third type involving private and non-profit institutions, for which participating in the MIF adds value to their core missions. Establishing a MIF responds to various strategies and functions, which must be defined at the initial states of project development. The projects have similar goals in terms of improving the livelihoods of the local actors- being smallholder farmers, entrepreneurs or womens' groups, but the motives for forming the MIF varied according to the project strategy. In both coffee projects, the organizations comprising the MIF had a strong development focus, complementing their activities with support of governmental organizations responsible for actions in the coffee value chain, such as research, market and trade support, extension and advisory service providers. LSCI-IS and WATDEV projects respond to the logic of multi-country implementation of efforts, to maximize the investments and frequently working with the same national partners, chiefly the national research organizations. CoW is a particular case where the MIF had a bottoms up origin as there were particular individuals coming together to form a on a volunteering bases.

The duration of MIFs depends on their purpose and function in the innovation trajectory: forming networks, capitalization and sensemaking, solving conflicting interests, knowledge creation and exchange, entrepreneurship, and others. Optimally, the outcomes of these MIFs could be integrated into country development strategies.

The steps followed by most MIFs to ensure that technical and functional capacities are in place include:

1. *Needs Assessment*: to identify the specific capacities required for the successful operation of the MIF. The assessment considered the goals, objectives, and activities of the platform.
2. *Stakeholder Mapping*: Defined the roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder involved in the platform. Identify the skills, expertise, and resources that each party brings to the table.
3. *Governance Structure*: Established a clear governance structure that outlines decision-making processes, roles, and responsibilities to ensure that the MIF runs effectively.

4. *Communication and Coordination*: Using regular meetings, reporting mechanisms, and online platforms to facilitate collaboration and information sharing among stakeholders.
5. *Resource Allocation*: Ensured that the necessary financial, human, and technical resources are available to support the functioning of the platform.
6. *Monitoring and Evaluation*: Implemented a system for monitoring and evaluating the performance of the platform. Solicit feedback from stakeholders to identify areas for improvement. This helps us to identify areas that require improvement and ensures that the MIF stays aligned with its goals.
7. *Knowledge Management*: Established systems for capturing and sharing knowledge and best practices within the platform and beyond. This ensures that lessons learned are documented and can inform future activities and decision-making.
8. *Sustainability Planning*: To ensure the long-term sustainability of the MIF, while exploring various funding models, partnerships, or income-generating activities to support ongoing operations beyond the project lifetime.
9. *Documentation and Reporting*: Keep thorough records of platform activities, decisions, and outcomes. Regularly report on progress and achievements to stakeholders and funders are submitted.

There are at least three key functional capacities mentioned as relevant to ensure that the MIF perform satisfactorily and contribute to achieve their goals:

1. *Adaptability*: Prepared to adapt and evolve the MIF as needed. As circumstances change or new challenges arise, the MIF may need to adjust its strategies and capacities accordingly.
2. *Leadership and Facilitation*: Strong leaders and facilitators guide the platform's activities. Because effective leadership is essential for maintaining momentum and keeping stakeholders engaged.
3. *Continuous Learning*: Encourage a culture of continuous learning and improvement within the MIF. Encourage stakeholders to share their experiences and insights to enhance overall effectiveness.

What are the main managerial challenges, risks and pitfalls of these MIFs linked to project-based approaches, which could jeopardize their contributions to innovation development and generalization?

Sometimes MIFs are not necessarily the best option for innovation or to address the issues the innovation is targeting, and they also can be the place for powerplay among actors, based on their respective interests, their reading of the situation and their objectives. MIFs can be blind as to why some stakeholders do not participate. The more the objective or the innovation is complex, or systemic, the more the MIFs entail interactions, multiple and less readable limits and multiple players.

Challenges are to ensure that those who own the problem are involved in finding the solution, from the onset. This often requires collectively agreeing on terminology, on shared interests and taking into account cultural sensitivities or differences. Designing and implementing MIFs also require a length of time as well as the development of personal skills, such as patience and creativity among the project teams. Identifying champions, allowing for flexibility and adjustment, and a mechanism to support stakeholders to move in the same direction and arbitrate between function-oriented and equity-oriented are key to success, as well as a thoroughly thought-through exit strategy.

Having a clear roadmap facilitates monitoring and follow-up as well as group learning. However, adaptive planning occurs once deep understanding and trust are gained, which depending on the case may take a considerable period, challenging the timeline for outcomes. Identifying problems and opportunities along the process and carrying out foresight exercises are very useful in this phase. Collaborative activities, such

as field days, capacity building workshops and participatory planning sessions, provide opportunities for building trust.

Ensuring and promoting participation takes up a good portion of the actions within an MIF. At the organizational level, memorandums of understanding or letters of agreement are helpful tools, but do not guarantee effective collaboration. Actions that show quick results are recommended as strategy to motivate to move forward with the MIF, such as increasing the participation of minority groups in the governing bodies of the MIF. Periodic monitoring and evaluations can promote that the collaboration is maintained and have significant results. At the individual level, providing incentives, through a reward or recognition system such as championships, encourages participants to collaborate. Training on technical topics is usually the entry point for many facilitating organizations to provide support in niches, such as creating opportunities for strengthening the capacities of youth, women and other groups that may be underrepresented or made invisible in MIF.

The sustainability of MIFs beyond the project cycle is still a challenge and greater efforts are needed to promote local ownership and sustained resources to ensure continuity after external support is withdrawn.

Acknowledgements and contact

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