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Tropics



Multi-stakeholder processes in Central Africa

Successes, struggles and lessons learned

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On a cool but sunny Friday morning in May 2015, a 56-year-old farmer called Joseph was sitting on the porch of the local administration office in Kadahenda, Rwanda. He was staring at the potato fields, the recently planted trees and the sector's new potato seed storage house, and felt happy. He realised that, exactly one year before, he had been sitting on that same spot, looking at the same mountains, which at that time had shown signs of poor potato production caused by inferior seeds and limited knowledge on how best to plant and manage this crop. Suddenly, the sound of a motorcycle woke him up from his daydream, and Joseph looked up to see his new partner from the SACCO bank who had just arrived for their monthly innovation platform meeting. Joseph smiled at him and knew that the innovation platform of which he was the president had brought him and his fellow farmers much more than 'just' the improved seeds they expected to get at the start.¹

Co-creation of knowledge and collective action in innovation platforms in the Great Lakes region

The Great Lakes region of Central Africa is an area abundant in hills, people and conflicts. Its high altitude and cooler climate make it ideal for agriculture. But soils have been exhausted, spare land is no longer available, and farm households in parts of this region rank among the most food insecure and malnourished on earth. Years of civil conflict have moreover paralyzed agricultural advisory and extension services and resulted in poor access to markets. Although there is unclarity about what type of solutions will be effective to address these problems, it is clear that developing, testing and implementing solutions requires collaboration, learning and collective action between farmers, governments, civil society organisations, researchers and the private sector.

Please refer to this brochure as: Schut, M., D. Lamers, M. Sartas, C. Okafor, C. Hicintuka, S. Mapatano, D. Kagabo, P. van Asten and B. Vanlauwe, 2016. Multi-stakeholder processes in Central Africa: Successes, struggles and lessons learned. Developed under the CGIAR Research Program on Integrated Systems for the Humid Tropics (Humidtropics) by Wageningen University (WUR) and the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA), April 2016.

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¹ Lamers et al., 2015.

“What we are doing is to facilitate communication and exchange of information. (...) We are convinced that everybody has something to offer. So we need to create conditions in which all people are able to express themselves, independent of social status, class, and so on. I think that is the key issue; how do we make sure that the different groups work together and share what they know.”

(DR Congo IP facilitator, July 2015, light editing by authors)

To facilitate this collaboration, ‘multi-stakeholder innovation platforms’ (hence referred to as IPs) were initiated in Burundi, Rwanda and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Integrated Systems for the Humid Tropics (Humidtropics). An IP is a space for learning and change. It is a group of organizations represented by one or multiple people that often have different backgrounds and interests. Depending on the issue at stake, IPs can include farmers, input providers, government officials, extension officers, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), researchers, media, processors, retailers, etc. The IP members come together to diagnose problems, set priorities, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their objectives.²

The initiation of the process

In May 2013, Humidtropics kicked off in Rwanda, Burundi and DR Congo. In each of the countries, (inter)national agricultural research organisations, together with the governments and development partners, identified regions with high agricultural development potential with regards to – amongst others – reducing poverty and land degradation, and market opportunities. Humidtropics appointed a national facilitator in each of the countries: well-connected people working in national research organisations or NGOs with a proven capacity to facilitate co-creation of knowledge and collective action processes. A first step was a series of field visits and focus group discussions with farmers, extension officers, and representatives of development organisations, private sector and research to identify so-called ‘entry themes’ related to a specific commodity (e.g. Irish potato in Rwanda) or theme (e.g. crop-livestock integration in Burundi and eastern DR Congo) in the selected regions.

Based on the entry themes, community level IPs were established. Each IP elected a president and secretary responsible for the overall functioning of the platform. In addition, national level IPs were established to provide more general support to the community level

² See: Homann-Kee Tui et al., 2014

IPs in accessing knowledge (e.g. science advice), inputs (e.g. good quality seeds and fertilizers) and services (e.g. credit). These national level IPs are facilitated by the appointed national facilitators.

BOX 1 Platform-led innovation funds in Burundi

The introduction of a platform-led innovation fund in November 2014 - which was a budget allocated to the platforms aimed to finance IP prioritized activities - boosted Humidtropics in Burundi. It was decided to invest the funds in creating conditions for livestock introduction. Pigsties and composters were built, training was provided and piglets – the most feasible livestock option for the region – were distributed among farmers of varying socio-economic status. This generated enthusiasm among farmers and other stakeholders. Livestock provided the missing link between existing research and development activities. Now, crop residues from the intercropping experiments are fed to the pigs. Grasses have been planted as animal feed crops, while at the same time serving as an erosion control method. Pig manure is being applied to the farmers’ field to close the nutrient cycle. The platform-led innovation fund created the flexibility to work on local stakeholders’ needs.

During participatory workshops³ held early 2014, community and national level IP members identified their greatest challenges related to the entry theme (e.g. pest and disease problems, poor access to high quality seeds, limited availability of land, poorly functioning extension system). Farmers, private sector, researchers, NGOs and government analysed how their challenges related to each other, which showed that collective action across community and national levels is needed to enable change. The involvement of government ensured alignment of entry themes with national agricultural policy,



PHOTO 1 IP members identify relations between constraints and challenges for crop-livestock integration faced by different stakeholder groups.

(Photo taken by M. Schut)

³ The workshops facilitated the Rapid Appraisal of Agricultural Innovation Systems (RAAIS). For more information see Schut et al., 2016a.

but also provided a space for government to express their constraints to actively support agricultural development (e.g. understaffed extension services, poor research facilities, frequent policy changes). Based on available expertise and resources, specific research and development activities were prioritised.

The co-creation journey

Members of the community IP were closely involved in designing the research and development activities. Experiments to test different varieties, planting distances and crop management strategies were undertaken by researchers, extension officers and farmers. Farmers volunteered to invest their land and labour, whereas government and research organisations provided the inputs such as seeds, (organic) fertilizers and management advice (e.g. planting distances). Where such research and development activities could not be supported through ongoing projects, they could be funded through a platform-led innovation fund.

In Burundi, the platform-led innovation fund was used to support the introduction of pigs in the Central Highlands region (Box 1). Farmers



PHOTO 2 The Burundi IP facilitator inspects the piglets in Gitega, Burundi.
(Photo taken by D. Lamers)

and government extension officers collaborated in the development of pig stables. The farmers had to contribute the labour, whereas materials were partly provided by Humidtropics and partly by farmers. Extension officers and researchers advised farmers on how best to construct the stables to reduce risks of pests and diseases. An initial batch of 50 piglets was provided to farmers through the R4D program (Photo 2). Each farmer received three piglets and was expected to provide the same amount of piglets to another farmer as soon as their pigs had reproduced.

BOX 2 Government buy-in in South Kivu, DR Congo

In May 2015, the Minister of Agriculture for South Kivu Province joined a platform meeting and visited some fields demonstrating the use of fertiliser to increase production. Local platform members explained their positive experiences as well as their challenge in accessing sufficient fertiliser in the area. The minister decided to provide \$2000 worth of fertiliser to be distributed by the innovation platform to poor farmers in the region.

In all countries, farmers together with the government or NGO extension officers managed the field and livestock activities, whereas the researchers gathered data related to yields, farmer preferences, effect of fertilizers, household nutrition, gender dynamics, etc. In this way, the interaction and exchange of knowledge between the farmers, researchers and other stakeholders was stimulated. But the field activities also attracted the attention of policymakers and politicians (Box 2).

Joint reflection and learning along the way

At the end of each season, IP reflection meetings were organised with the both the community and national IPs. During the reflection meetings, the scope of the research and development activities was reviewed, and the collaboration process was evaluated by all IP members. Based on the reflection, specific research or development activities were abandoned, or others were included based on the changing priorities of e.g. farmers or the private sector. This occurred in a rather organic way, for example, forage hedges were planted to both produce feed for animals and control erosion in Burundi. Based on the outcome of the reflection meeting, research and development activities for the next season were adjusted and defined.

Preliminary impacts of learning and collective action

Although it is still early to speak of ‘impacts’, there are several examples of how the co-creation of knowledge and collective action through IPs is supporting agricultural development in the Greater Lakes region. In Eastern DR Congo, for instance, the community IP members decided to request land from a local landowner. They succeeded, and the landowner offered them three hectares of land, which for the time being was free of charge. Twelve community IP members invested in cultivating the three hectares of land by pooling together \$650 for hiring external labour and purchasing inputs for cultivation. After preparing the first hectare in August 2014, they planted a replica of the cassava–bean intercropping demonstration plot that had been developed together with the national level IP. Around March 2015, they cultivated the second hectare; this time with cassava only, re-investing the money earned by selling the beans harvested from the first hectare. The third hectare was to be planted with maize, starting in September 2015 (Figure 1).

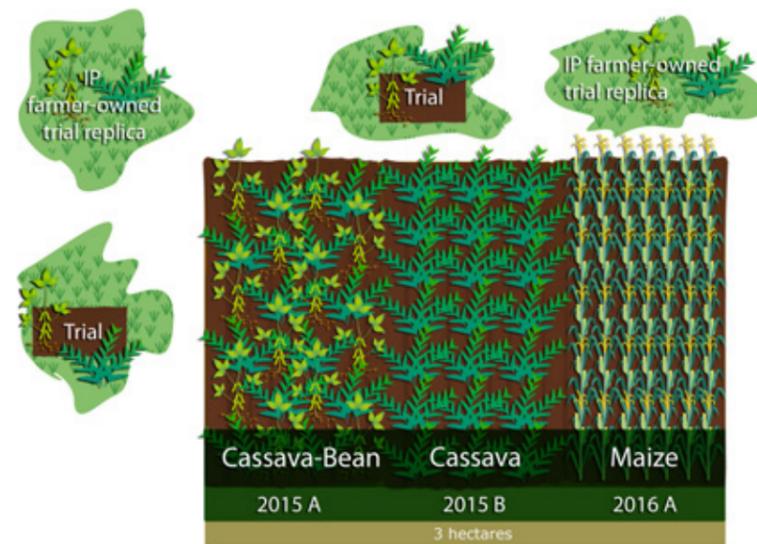


FIGURE 1 Different IP-managed fields, including the three hectares provided by the landowner and smaller replicas of research trials. (Credits E. van Schijndel)

Another example comes from Rwanda, where the community-level IP in Kadahenda has strengthened collaboration between farmers and the micro-finance institute SACCO, resulting in improved access to credit based on innovative payment arrangements (e.g. repayment after harvest time). Government provided a collective potato seed storage facility that farmers jointly renovated, and provide their office for IP meetings.

Lessons learned from co-creation of knowledge and collective action through IPs

Almost three years after their initiation, some lessons regarding the performance and impact of IPs for co-creation of knowledge in the Great Lakes region can be documented (Table 1).⁴ Our experiences show that community level IPs can provide a vehicle for the co-creation of knowledge and collective action. They can bring together different types of knowledge, experiences, skills, resources and attitudes that are needed for collective action. Putting resources in the hands of stakeholders enables them to steer the research and development agendas, and to implement activities that no other projects or businesses are able to support. Having IPs across different levels seems promising as many community level barriers (e.g. related to access to land, inputs, credit, markets) are rooted in barriers that require action at national level (e.g. changing policies, land tenure arrangements, etc.). The regular IP reflection meetings stimulate short-loop learning and timely adaptation of IP activities to support co-creation of knowledge and collective action.

What looks promising?	What requires attention?
The co-creation of knowledge around a concrete commodity of value chain problem generates energy and enthusiasm for collective action	Changing mind-sets and role patterns for all stakeholders involved takes time
Putting budgets in the hands of stakeholders (platform-led innovation funds) can fill research or development project gaps	Aligning stakeholder needs with ongoing projects and organisational mandates and preferences
Multi-level IPs (at community and national level) can support addressing challenges across different levels	Platforms remain depending on external (financial) resources which creates challenges for their sustainability
Short learning loops (e.g. through post-seasonal reflection meetings) support adaptive management of platform processes and innovations	Inclusion/ exclusion of farmers and representation of stakeholders
Local public and private organisations are co-investing in the IP activities	Involvement of key scaling actors (e.g. high level development donors and private sector) in the national IPs seems problematic

However, IPs are also experiencing challenges. Co-creation of knowledge and collective action requires bringing together different types of knowledge, experiences, skills, resources and attitudes, and acknowledging that all of these are equally important in achieving

TABLE 1 Lessons learned from knowledge co-creation and collective action through IPs.

⁴ See also Schut et al., 2016b.

PHOTO 3 Humidtropics' partners monitor the growth of an improved common field bean variety grown in rotation with maize-soybean intercrop in Eastern Rwanda.

(Photo taken by A. Hero)



impact (e.g. scientific versus practical knowledge). This requires mind-set and role changes in terms of researchers and other service providers being willing to respond to farmers' demands (in stead of pushing their technologies), and farmers being willing to invest their own time and energy in exploring opportunities (in stead of demanding allowances) to participate in efforts aimed at improving their livelihoods. Changing these mind-sets is a process that will require time.

Another challenge that we experienced is that demands by farmers and private sector do not always align well with ongoing projects and organisational mandates and preferences (e.g. to work on livestock in Burundi). In such cases platform-led innovation funds can fill gaps and ensure that demands are met. However, the allocation of these platform-led innovation funds to organisations that are already strong in the platform, may lead to exclusion of other stakeholder groups. Many of the knowledge co-creation activities in developing countries are externally initiated by development and research organisations. This implies a certain dependency on external financial and knowledge resources which may endanger the platforms' sustainability.

Lastly, knowledge co-creation and collective action processes are strongly shaped by those who are part of that process. The inclusion/exclusion of specific groups (e.g. women and youth), stakeholder group representation (e.g. do farmer organisations actually represent the needs and interests of farmers) and power dynamics influence the quality of participatory multi-stakeholder processes, their outcomes and impact, and for whom these creates opportunities, or additional barriers. Based on continuous documentation and reflection we are trying to understand these struggles and explore strategies to overcome them.

Acknowledgement

The above-described experiences originate from work by the Consortium for Improving Agricultural Livelihoods in Central Africa (CIALCA) that is funded by the Belgian Directorate General of Development Cooperation (DGDC). CIALCA forms part of the CGIAR Research Program on Integrated Systems for the Humid Tropics (Humidtropics). We would like to acknowledge Humidtropics and the CGIAR Fund Donors (www.cgiar.org/who-we-are/cgiar-fund/fund-donors-2) for their provision of core funding without which this research could not have been possible. The authors appreciate all farmers, government officials, researchers, and civil society, NGO and private sectors representatives who collaborated with us and provided data and insights necessary for this study.

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The CGIAR Research Program on Integrated Systems for the Humid Tropics (Humidtropics) is an agricultural research for development program led by the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). Humidtropics aims for sustainable intensification of agricultural systems to improve the livelihoods of farm households. An important intervention strategy in Humidtropics is the strengthening of multi-stakeholder collaboration and partnerships to achieve development impact. To facilitate that, two types of multi-stakeholder platforms have been established (1) innovation platforms to foster participatory experimentation at local community level, and (2) national research for development platforms to bring on board the key scaling actors.

Humidtropics, a CGIAR Research Program led by IITA, seeks to transform the lives of the rural poor in tropical America, Asia and Africa. Research organisations involved in core partnership with Humidtropics are AVRDC, Bioversity International, CIAT, CIP, FARA, icipe, ICRAF, ILRI, IITA, IWMI and WUR.

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