

Connecting maize farmers with value chains boosts sustainable agricultural intensification in Kenya

Summary and key facts



Most farmers operate in isolation which causes difficulties in accessing information and new technologies.



Agricultural Innovation Platforms (AIPs) are enabling farmers and other value chain actors to create value using locally available resource.



Formalizing AIPs as critical economic entities and enablers of agricultural value chain development should be a rural development imperative worth anchoring in current county strategies and frameworks.

What is the problem?

Farmers working in isolation pay more for inputs, receive less for outputs

Agricultural development can contribute to eradicating poverty, food security and economic development. However, smallholder farmers operate in an increasingly complex and uncertain environment, which requires continuous adaptation and innovation. With innovation we mean the process through which knowledge gets developed and applied by exploring new practices and approaches and putting them into use. Effective interaction is needed between farmers, business, service providers, research,

development organizations and other stakeholders to address the constraints in the agriculture system and to enable innovation to take place. Multi-stakeholder innovation platforms have become commonly used tools in agricultural development and research projects and programs, and were widely applied in the Sustainable Intensification of Maize-Legume Systems for Food Security in Eastern and Southern Africa (SIMLESA) for up scaling Conservation Agriculture-based Sustainable Intensification (CASI).

Agricultural Innovation Platforms, how do they work?



An Agricultural Innovation Platform (AIP) is like a cooking pot to which the actors involved jointly contribute to problem diagnosis, identification of opportunities, coordination, experimenting, learning and implementing of ideas to address problems in a value chain. An AIP involves a group of individuals (who often represent organizations and value chain actors) with different backgrounds, skills and interests.

What solutions were identified from research?

Connecting farmers to value chains improves productivity for all

SIMLESA coordinated by International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO) operated in eastern and western Kenya. In eastern Kenya, the initial counties included Embu, Meru and Tharaka Nithi. Activities were subsequently scaled out to the counties of Meru, Embu, Nyeri and Kitui. In western Kenya, the two counties initially included were Siaya and Bungoma, with subsequent scaling to the counties of Vihiga and Busia. SIMLESA-Kenya used cluster approaches to reach out to farmer groups cost-effectively. This led to the evolution of Agricultural Innovation

Platforms (AIPs) which brought together researchers, extension providers, saving and credit providers, farmers' field schools, and church-based organizations and cooperatives. Activities utilized multiple approaches, many of which were familiar to farmers, such as field demonstrations and participatory variety selection. AIPs were a relatively new approach and were facilitated by SIMLESA Scientists and managed locally, with the majority of members belonging to the same regions. The AIPs did, however, include members that operated at regional and national levels, such as credit providers, crop insurance and seed companies.

SIMLESA AIP activities:



Organize and hold monthly meetings for members to share knowledge, identify key constraints on production, processing and marketing and prioritize solutions as entry points



The promotion of new technologies through establishment of demonstration sites



Organize field days and exchange visits around the established demonstration sites



Resource mobilization



Disseminating improved target crop varieties and technologies through media and trade fairs (local FM radio station)

The AIPs identified the major constraints in the maize and legume systems. Among the key and cross cutting constraints identified were; low productivity, poor market access and poor access to financial resources. In the early stages of AIP formation the major focus was on production and farmer needs. Issues related to value addition were often listed as secondary. However, this trend changed with time as the AIPs matured and with the entry of new actors such as processors and credit facilitators.

The promotion of new technologies through demonstration sites and field days formed the core of the platform's activities. Since the early days, demonstration sites were established to promote certain agronomic practices related to conservation agriculture. Twelve demonstration plots were done under optimized conditions and aimed to show the suitability of the pre-selected practices under the prevailing agroecological condition. Farmers provided land and labor and research and companies provided seeds and required inputs. The sites were mainly controlled by research and extension. An important question in the early stages was whether farmers would also be able to realize these optimized conditions once they adopt the technology. This question has remained a major challenge in the traditional approach to research where it is assumed

that experts (researchers) generate knowledge, which farmers and others adopt, resulting in change. In reality, such a linear approach often has a limited impact, the research turns out to be inappropriate, and the findings are not used.

The AIP approach has shifted research to a more collaborative and reflexive mode, with increased collaboration between researchers and other stakeholders. This ensures that farmers are no longer left alone to grapple with the vagaries of technology uptake. Under the auspices of the AIPs the constraint of poor access to inputs was solved through collective purchase of agro-inputs and sometimes at reduced cost from member agro-vets. Market access, another major constraint for many farmers was enhanced through the establishment of collection centers where farmers would bring and sell their produce at higher prices through an agreement with the traders. The challenge here was the investments needed to construct collection and storage facilities for the AIP members.

Poor access to financial resources was also addressed through the approach. Through the AIPs various ways of accessing financial resources were identified and included; writing grant proposals/project, credit and group level savings.

What are the opportunities for policy action?

Support rural communities to form viable AIPs

It is apparent that AIPs ensure community cohesiveness in confronting the challenges of agricultural markets facing a given community. The diverse membership (involving research and extension providers, seed companies, agro-dealers, and credits providers) provides one-stop spaces within which community members can interact with

participants at various levels of the value chain. The critical element is that they increase the stock of social capital, critical in enhancing the effectiveness of value chains by enhancing collective trust and reciprocity, the lifeblood of functional markets and value chains. The AIPs can therefore be a useful policy lever.

Why act now?

Well integrated and inclusive agricultural markets are critical enablers of development. Well coordinated markets that pool products, provide information, physical and financial services imply as process of modernization. This needed process of

modernization will not happen without deliberate efforts. These efforts could take the form of policy and program innovations targeted at encouraging collective action and other institutions that facilitate market coordination.

References and sources

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