

Building a multi-actor platform to promote farmer innovation

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Credit: Mass Photo-Video, Parakou, Benin



Workshop session.

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Promoting farmer innovation has emerged in recent decades as a critical step towards sustainable development. It is not just a matter of including local innovations in agricultural research and development. The participatory innovation development (PID) approach has proven to be effective in enhancing small-scale farmers' self-confidence and creativity as they build on their indigenous knowledge to develop new locally relevant ways to solve problems or capture new opportunities.

The Prolinnova (Promoting local innovation in ecological agriculture and natural resource management) network has been particularly active in spreading this approach. Through Country Platforms (CPs) made up of formal researchers, agricultural advisors and members of farmer organisations and NGOs, Prolinnova encourages and facilitates many farming communities around the world to develop their own innovations and become involved in multi-actor innovation processes to achieve food and nutrition security and sustainable livelihoods.

In late 2019, the University of Parakou (Benin), the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT, Netherlands), the NGO AgriBio Services (Senegal) and the international Prolinnova network joined forces in a training project called: Capacity building of agricultural high school teachers to support social entrepreneurship based on local innovation for food and nutrition security. This is funded through the Orange Knowledge Programme of Nuffic (Dutch organisation for internationalisation in education). Delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the project could start only in July 2020, when it held three virtual training sessions for teachers in vocational training schools and for university students passionate about local innovation in agricultural entrepreneurship for food and nutrition security.

Sharing ideas

Virtual sessions with international experts were complemented by practical assignments, during which trainees interacted with each other and with other local actors, including men and

women farmer innovators. Local experts mentored the processes on the ground. These activities became excellent fora for sharing and pooling ideas on how to further integrate indigenous knowledge, local creativity and PID into agricultural research and development in Benin. The project team contacted several people and organisations in the country to identify others interested in the approach. This led to the organisation of a meeting on 15 May 2021 in Parakou (northern Benin) to set up a multi-actor platform to promote local innovation and farmer-led joint research and development.

The meeting revealed that the positive evidence at local level emerging from the Nuffic-funded project helped mobilise people around the Prolinnova initiative. The strong motivation of local actors, including farmers, convinced many about the relevance of a multi-actor platform to promote PID. Other CPs in Africa shared their experi-

ences during the meeting; this enhanced the Benin participants' commitment to collaborate. Because they felt a need to maintain the partnership beyond the current project, they expressed willingness to contribute in material, technical and financial terms to operate the platform. Keen to engage in policy dialogue to institutionalise the PID approach, they proposed numerous ideas for activities and resource mobilisation.

Growing public interest in local innovation is a fertile ground for the new platform to launch a national dynamic of contributing to global efforts to promote PID by farming communities, scientists and development actors. The new platform wants to rely more on its members' contributions than on external funding to bring farmer creativity to the fore. The members still have much to learn about managing a virtual platform, not registered as another NGO competing with

its members but rather collaborating to advocate for the values that shape the PID approach. The group in Benin is eager to meet these challenges in order to develop as an active platform within the international Prolinnova network.

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Workshop participants.

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