Farmers call the tune:

Towards a farmer-governed approach to ARD through Local Innovation Support Funds

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Why is a farmer-governed approach to agricultural research & development (ARD) needed?

- Research and extension still mainly technology transfer, but gradual increase in participatory approaches
- Farmers: sources of local knowledge and innovation for development
- New funding mechanisms emerging for participatory ARD (competitive grants)
- **BUT** funding in researchers’ control to involve farmers (1-way “participation”)
- Need to challenge how ARD funding is channelled → *change the power balance*
PROLINNOVA partners engaged in action research to explore complementary ARD funding mechanisms:

- so farmers can invest in their own research and decide on the support they need for it: farmer-led participatory ARD
- to make ARD more accountable to & relevant for smallholder farmers
- to develop, test and scale up replicable models for farmer-governed ARD
**PROLINNOVA: PROMoting Local INNOVAtion in ecologically oriented agriculture and NRM**

Diverse partners (governmental and civil society) in 18 countries united in the conviction that:

- Farmers are **creative** and generate relevant **local innovations** = locally new and better ways of doing things

- Research and extension should support **farmer-led innovation processes in partnership** with farmer organisations, universities, NGOs and private sector

Nepalese researchers learn from farmer innovator
Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs)

- FAIR (Farmer Access to Innovation Resources) with support from Netherlands & French Governments and Rockefeller Foundation

- Turns conventional ARD funding mechanisms upside-down: control over funds in the hands of farmers, who define what will be studied and with which partners

- Being piloted by PROLINNOVA partners in Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda

- Main question in the action research:
  
  "To what extent is this complementary funding mechanism feasible, effective and efficient in improving smallholder farming?"
How does an LISF work?

- Multistakeholder team coordinates implementation of pilot
- Develops guidelines for grant management process
- Sets up local Fund Management Committees (FMCs)
- Open call for proposals circulated
- Farmers submit simple proposals
- FMCs use their criteria to select grantees and provide resources in cash or kind
- Farmers lead (joint) research
- Farmer researchers share results
- Participatory impact assessment
Main screening criteria similar across piloting countries

- Idea driven by applicant(s)
- Innovation appears sound in economic, environmental & social terms
- Applicable by resource-poor
- LISF support can add value to (improve or validate) proposed innovation
- Applicants willing to share results (public goods from public funds)
- Proposal is for *experimentation and learning*, not farm investment
Two main models to manage LISF

1) More centralised multistakeholder committee (key partner organisations and farmer representatives):
   - more mutual learning by farmers and support agencies
   - stricter screening according to agreed criteria
   - fewer applications made and fewer funded, but larger grants
   - relatively high costs of staff involved

2) Decentralised farmer-managed committees:
   - less involvement of other actors in the farmers’ research
   - funds not necessarily used for research and innovation while farmers still learning principles of LISFs
   - more applications made and more funded, but smaller grants
   - lower operational costs
Example: Current mechanism in Ambo, Ethiopia

ERSHA (Ethiopia Rural Self-Help Association): LISF coordinator plays advisory role in vetting committee and in monitoring.

FMC that vets proposals consists of people from the 5 sub-districts.
Examples of use of funds

- Farmer-to-farmer visits to learn about local innovation
- Joint experimentation based on initiatives of individual or groups of farmers:
  - Costs related to experimentation: notebooks, measuring equipment etc
  - Payment for involving scientists / specialists (travel, accommodation)
  - Documentation equipment and materials

Some topics of innovation/experimentation:

- Soil fertility, water harvesting, pest control, food processing, marketing, livestock feeding, beehives, new local institutions (e.g. new forms of savings and credit)
Challenges:

- New concept: takes time to understand
- Relatively high support costs
- Difficult to involve formal researchers:
  - farmers initially want to experiment on own, using local advice
  - research institutes have own agenda & little room to support farmer initiatives
- Limited sharing of process and results: mainly farmer-to-farmer communication (now trying farmer-led documentation)
- Slow process in generating in-country funds for LISFs

Ethiopian farmer used LISF grant to improve his water-lifting innovation
Some indications of impact

Involvement of different actors in LISF pilots helped to:

- **Strengthen farmer organisation** focused on locally relevant research and increase capacities to handle own research and learning funds.
- **Build smallholder farmers’ capacities to formulate own R&D needs**.
- **Increase farmers’ confidence** to interact with “outsiders” on equal basis.
- **Develop local multistakeholder platforms that discuss and prioritise research**.
- **Stimulate interest of scientists and extension agents to recognise and support farmer-led joint research**.
Outlook

- Promising steps toward complementary funding mechanism that gives farmers direct access to funds for research and innovation according to their priorities

- M&E by PROLINNOVA multistakeholder platforms in each country generating evidence for institutional and policy change

- LISFs still being tested: more work needed to learn from pilots, to improve LISF concept and to embed it in local ARD structures

- Need to work with farmer organisations to scale up LISF countrywide and mobilise funds from in-country sources

  - retaining the smallholder focus & farmer-led character of the LISF
Vision

A world in which farmers play decisive roles in research and development for sustainable livelihoods