

1 | Introduction: a global initiative to promote local innovation

When you are in a rural area, do you assume that all the farmers are doing the same thing – particularly “traditional” farmers – or do you see that this farmer does things a little differently than that one, or even that the same farmer does the same thing differently in different fields or with different animals? When you see a farmer doing something differently than what you suggested to him, do you correct her/him – or do you try to find out why s/he does it differently?

This booklet is about looking for and finding out about the differences – and, by doing so, trying to make a difference in local people's lives. It brings together the experiences of persons and organisations in various parts of the world that are making deliberate efforts to recognise and to build on the positive differences in the way local people do things. These activities form part of an international programme called PROLINNOVA, which stands for “Promoting Local INNOVATION in ecologically-oriented agriculture and natural resource management”. In this introductory chapter, we explain what PROLINNOVA is all about and how it is structured, we offer you our understanding of some of the main concepts behind this initiative, and we let you know what you can find in this booklet – and in further booklets in this series.

What is PROLINNOVA and how does it function?

PROLINNOVA is a Global Partnership Programme under the umbrella of the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR). It is an international learning and advocacy network that was initiated by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) keenly concerned with agricultural research and development (ARD). It focuses on recognising the dynamics of indigenous knowledge and on learning how to strengthen the capacities of farmers (a term that includes peasant/family farmers, forest dwellers, pastoralists and fisherfolk) to adjust to changing conditions – to develop and adapt their own site-appropriate systems and institutions of resource management. The central goal of PROLINNOVA is to develop and institutionalise partnerships and methodologies that promote processes of local innovation for environmentally-sound use of natural resources. The ultimate aim is that an approach of building on and enhancing local innovation processes through participatory action learning becomes understood, accepted and integrated in the regular work of research, extension and education institutions.

During the period 2004–2006, this international programme was underway in nine countries: Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nepal, Niger, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda. In each country, an NGO convenes the major stakeholders in ARD to design and implement a “country programme”. A sister programme (PROFEIS – Promoting Farmer Innovation and Experimentation in the Sahel) received funding in late 2006 to expand the activities in francophone West Africa. Programmes to promote local innovation in the Andes and in Mozambique were designed at multi-stakeholder workshops also in late 2006 and in Kenya in 2007. Similar initiatives are underway in Nigeria and the South Pacific.



Participants from PROLINNOVA country programmes exchange ideas at a meeting in Ghana in 2008 (photo: Philip Penafior)

In each country, the local NGO serves as secretariat for a **National Steering Committee (NSC)** or a group with another name but the same functions. This is made up of people from governmental research, extension and education institutions, other NGOs and – wherever possible – farmer organisations. The NSC defines the strategies of the country programme,

PROLINNOVA's vision, mission and goal

Vision: *a world in which farmers play decisive roles in agricultural research and development for sustainable livelihoods*

Mission: *to foster a culture of mutual learning and synergy in local innovation processes in agriculture and natural resource management*

Goal: *to develop and institutionalise partnerships and methodologies that promote processes of local innovation for environmentally-sound use of natural resources*

In particular, PROLINNOVA seeks to:

- demonstrate the effectiveness of user-led innovation for sustainable development
- build farmer-extension-researcher partnerships
- enhance capacities of farmers, researchers, extension workers and policymakers in participatory approaches
- pilot decentralised funding mechanisms to promote local innovation
- stimulate national and regional policy dialogue to favour local innovation
- set up platforms for reflection, analysis and learning about promoting local innovation
- integrate participatory approaches to farmer-led innovation and experimentation into research, extension and education institutions.

ranging from farmer-led experimentation to national-level advocacy. It gives policy and technical guidance and helps mobilise resources. It is the apex structure for accountability at country level. A smaller **Core Team** or **Working Group** is responsible for day-to-day implementation of the activities in the workplan of the country programme.

An **International Support Team (IST)** supports the country-level activities in terms of international coordination, capacity building, networking, web-based knowledge management, documentation, publishing and advocacy. The IST is made up of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) with headquarters in the Philippines, the Centre for International Cooperation attached to the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (CIS-VUA) and ETC EcoCulture, a Netherlands-based NGO. The secretariat of the international programme is in ETC EcoCulture.

The **PROLINNOVA Oversight Group (POG)** serves as a governance mechanism to ensure accountability of the Global Partnership Programme to the country programmes, their constituencies and the donors. It functions as a “board” composed of initially three but now four people elected from and by the country programmes, one elected from and by the IST and three external people elected by all country programmes and the IST. It draws up policies and guidelines for the international programme.

The key contacts within the programme are listed on pages 60-62.

In the decentralised design of the Global Partnership Programme, each country programme develops its own way of planning and implementing its activities, depending on its particular experience, history, circumstances, opportunities etc, instead of adopting a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The partners are developing country-specific ways to:

- document local innovations and experiments by resource-poor farmers and communities;
- strengthen partnerships between farmers, development agents and research scientists to refine local innovations and to encourage others to try them out;
- create wider awareness of and skills in participatory innovation development (PID) through a variety of learning mechanisms;
- develop and expand mechanisms that give farmers more influence over formal research, extension and education; and
- integrate farmer innovation and PID approaches into formal agricultural research, development and education.

International workshops involving all country programmes allow us all to learn from the different approaches taken in each country. This booklet attempts to highlight this diversity.

Some key concepts

Each of you may be thinking of different things when seeing such terms as “local innovation”. So let’s first of all explain what we mean when we use such terms. This is not to say that these definitions are the only true ones and will remain so for all time to come, not even for us. Promoting local innovation is a learning process for us all – including “simply” learning what it all means.

When we use the term “local innovation”, we refer to the *dynamics* of indigenous knowledge. By “**indigenous knowledge**” (IK), we mean the knowledge that grows within a social group, based on learning from experience over generations but also including what was gained at some time from other sources but has been completely internalised within the local ways of thinking and doing. “**Local innovation**” (*without* an “s”) refers to the *process* by which people in a given locality discover or develop new and better ways of doing things – using the locally available resources and on their own initiative, without pressure or direct support from formal research or development agents. The *outcome* of this process are “**local innovations**” (*with* an “s”), for example, farming techniques or ways of organising work that are new for that particular locality.

Local innovation	=	process
Local innovations	=	outcome of the process

Who are the “local innovators”? All farmers innovate to some extent, many of them simply in order to survive. But the innovators that we recognise are those who are doing something outstanding to improve their lives, their communities and/or their natural environment. They are farmers or land users who develop new ways of production or managing farming/natural resources, building on local knowledge (i.e. knowledge that everyone in the area has) but using new ideas from various sources, including their own creativity. They are often naturally curious people who are willing to take risks. They are not necessarily the “model farmers” who have been groomed by development projects to adopt transferred technologies.

Farmers have been experimenting informally and developing local innovations since time immemorial throughout the world, but only relatively recently have development professionals, scientists and academics started to give increased attention to identifying and documenting innovations and innovation systems and processes. It is not sufficient, however, just to document and perhaps even scientifically validate local innovations. To really make a difference, that is to say, to make a useful contribution to the local innovation system, all actors – farmers, development agents, scientists and others – need to move beyond the innovations that farmers have developed only with their own resources. Where the actors agree that it is appropriate to do so, they need

to develop these ideas further, in joint experimentation, also integrating relevant information and ideas coming from others, including formal research. Thus, the research and development agenda grows out of the ways in which rural people are already trying to improve their livelihood systems. It builds on existing ideas and motivations.

Many of you may already be familiar with the term “**Participatory Technology Development**” (PTD) and the activities involved in it: getting started; jointly analysing the local situation; looking for things to try to improve it; trying them out in community-led participatory experimentation; jointly analysing and sharing the results; and strengthening the ongoing process of PTD, often through strengthening local organisation and linkages with other actors in ARD. Identifying local innovation provides an entry point to PTD that starts with looking at what farmers are already trying, in their own efforts to solve problems or to grasp opportunities they have already identified. The joint situation analysis by community members and outsiders is based on these concrete examples: the local innovations become foci for them to examine opportunities, to plan joint experiments to explore the ideas further and to evaluate the results together.

A closer look at local innovation in agriculture and natural resource management (NRM) has revealed that it goes beyond technologies to include also socio-organisational arrangements such as new ways of regulating access to resources or new ways of community organisation. The term “**Participatory Innovation Development**” (PID) embraces this broader understanding of participatory research and development, and we therefore use this term here instead of PTD.

PID differs from farmers’ informal experimentation, which farmers are doing to a greater or lesser degree all the time, applying their own methods and criteria for assessing the results. PID is practised not only by farmers on their own but by more than one type of actor, for example, farmers and development agents, and/or farmers and formal researchers, and/or farmers and private entrepreneurs such as producers of agricultural inputs. For these other actors, recognising local innovation is an important step toward engaging in PID. It starts off the partnership on a positive footing, as the people coming from outside give value to local people’s knowledge and creativity.

We regard PID not just as an approach to research but primarily as an approach to *development*. Moreover, we see that most of the PTD/PID that is happening today is being done by farmers together with development agents without the involvement of formal researchers. And this we encourage, as it will not be possible for formal researchers to work together with the millions of smallholder farmers in remote, marginal and highly diverse areas throughout the world. In such areas, “blanket” solutions cannot be applied. Local experimentation is necessary to see if new ideas – whether from other farmers or from formal research – can fit the local setting.

Moreover, conditions are constantly changing, so all farming communities need to be able to adjust to these changes. Therefore, local innovation must be a never-ending process. PID should strengthen this process, and the farmers' main partners in PID will be development agents in governmental and non-governmental organisations and in the private sector.

In the areas where PROLINNOVA is focusing – in risk-prone areas of smallholder farming, including livestock-keeping – we regard the PID approach as a means of combating land degradation. If outsiders recognise local people's initiatives to conserve and restore natural resources using primarily the locally available inputs, projects with similar aims will have a greater chance of success, as they can build on indigenous creativity and the local people's own motivation.

Although we have tried to avoid the tongue-twisting term wherever possible, also the concept of “*institutionalisation*” appears in this booklet. With this, we mean integration of the approach into the programmes and activities of relevant institutions, in such a way that recognising local innovation and engaging in PID become part and parcel of the regular work of institutions of research, extension and education, as well as NGOs and farmer organisations.

It is important to stress that institutionalising the promotion of local innovation and PID does not aim at replacing other ARD efforts. It is complementary to them. If, for example, other forms of research – including more basic research – were not being done, the scientists would have nothing to offer the farmers in the partnership of participatory research. But promoting local innovation and experimentation can be a key to linking formal research with local initiatives.

Institutionalisation is not exactly the same as “*scaling up*”. Many people use this latter term to refer to the dissemination of a technology or idea over a wider area and to a larger number of persons. Scaling up does not necessarily lead to institutionalisation, but successful institutionalisation will eventually lead to scaling up of the approach of promoting local innovation and PID.

Why start with identifying local innovations?

Research and development agents who start to identify local innovations and innovation processes learn to see farmers as pro-active, as creative sources of good ideas, as real partners in ARD. At the same time, the farmers see themselves in this way and are encouraged to innovate even more. As explained above, local innovations offer entry points into participatory ARD, combining local and external knowledge, with the aim of increasing capacities within the local innovation system to adapt quickly to changing conditions and thus to improve livelihoods. So, identifying local innovation is just a start – it is a means to an end.

If this is so, then what are the country programmes doing with the local innovations they identify? They are using them for:

- information exchange, by documenting and sharing good ideas with other farmers;
- changing perceptions and attitudes of stakeholders in ARD;
- gaining entry into PID, in which farmers, scientists and development workers explore and improve the local ideas in joint research, each bringing in their own knowledge and experience;
- engaging in policy dialogue to create an enabling environment for local innovation and PID.

This booklet concentrates on the first two of these activities: documenting and exchanging information on local innovation, and giving recognition to the creativity of farmers so that they are perceived differently by themselves and by other actors in the local innovation system.

This booklet and the series

This is one in a series of booklets based on actual experiences of partners in the PROLINNOVA country programmes in promoting local innovation. In addition, we include some experiences made in prior projects – Indigenous Soil and Water Conservation in Africa (ISWC) and Promoting Farmer Innovation (PFI) – which laid the basis for the PROLINNOVA initiative. Another booklet in the series looks at how the country programmes have built and continue to build partnerships for PID. This booklet explains how they identified, gave recognition to, documented and shared local innovations as entry points for PID and institutional change. Further booklets will bring experiences in facilitating farmer-led participatory experimentation, farmer-managed funds for local innovation, farmer-led documentation and sharing, and stimulating institutional and policy change to create an enabling environment for PID.

We are writing these booklets in the active (rather than passive) form of the verb: that is, we do not say “It was done” but rather “This person/organisation did that” – identifying the actors and their actions. This is because we want to give insight into what people have actually done to recognise local innovation and facilitate the PID process.

This first chapter gives a short introduction to the PROLINNOVA programme and the key concepts behind it. Chapter 2, the main part of this booklet, is on identifying and giving recognition to local innovation as an entry point for PID. Here, we have put the real-life examples – provided mainly by the country programmes – in boxes and have provided a narrative that connects these examples in a more or less logical order. Chapter 3 brings four cases of documenting local innovation and serves to illustrate in more detail the discussion in Chapter 2. Chapter 4 shows the place of these activities described here – recognising local innovativeness and documenting local innovations –

within the larger process of promoting and facilitating farmer-led ARD. We regard this booklet as an innovation in itself: bringing together experiences on farmer innovativeness from many different countries in many different settings and documenting the type and more or less logical sequence of activities that promote local innovation.

“Anyone may use the innovation described here and modify or develop it further, provided that the modified or further developed innovation or any follow-up innovation, of which the innovation described here is an element, is likewise freely available and any description of it includes this proviso and acknowledges the source of information.”

Source: PROLINNOVA Guidelines No. 3 [www.prolinnova.net]