



# How to set up an Innovation Platform

Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Programme (SSA CP)



## What is an Innovation Platform?

An Innovation Platform is a physical or virtual forum established to facilitate interactions, and learning among stakeholders selected from a commodity chain leading to participatory diagnosis of problems; joint exploration of opportunities and investigation of solutions leading to the promotion of agricultural innovation along the targeted commodity chain. Functionally, Innovation Platforms operate at two levels—the strategic and the operational Innovation Platforms.

## Importance of Innovation Platforms

Innovation in agriculture is the process of ensuring that a new product or knowledge is converted to perpetual use. It leads to social and economic benefits, and is critical to agricultural development. For countries that depend almost completely on agriculture, innovations have to be encouraged for progress and poverty reduction. Innovation in agriculture occurs in a wide range of ways. For many years in



*An Innovation Platform is a strategic platform while the Innovation Cluster is an operational platform. Both are needed by any country/region/district that wants to change into IAR4D model for ARD.*



Africa, facilitation of innovation has been an exclusive preserve of the researchers. This has apparently not produced enough benefits in terms of impact as several of the developed inventions did not get adopted. With the frustration arising from the non-adoption of technologies experienced through the exclusion of other partners in the innovation process, researchers at different times engaged the extension delivery agencies and farmers in the process of innovation. Although this helped, it did not help far enough, giving room for an all inclusive partnership in the innovation process. Innovation Platforms therefore provide a good forum for these players to interact and play their roles in the innovation process.

## Types of Innovation Platforms

Although agricultural work usually takes place on the field and mainly in rural and remote locations, it is governed and managed by policies and decisions made both locally and at the center. Innovation Platforms are therefore required at different levels of management and governance related to agricultural development. In general terms, these

are both at the strategic and operational levels.

“Innovation Platforms (IP)” at the strategic levels are platforms set up at the higher levels of governance and management hierarchies. These are areas where strategies are determined for the development of agriculture in the domains of coverage. Thus, strategic Innovation Platforms could be set up at the national levels or the sub-national levels covering regions, districts, local governments, or prefects as the case may be. If these work in harmony and in complementarity, the process of innovation is promoted within the country. Strategic Innovation Platforms target the chief executives of stakeholder organizations and they discuss strategies to promote innovation along targeted commodity or system. They also facilitate the operations of Innovation Platforms operating at lower levels. Practically, Strategic Innovation Platforms are expected at the National and Regional levels where they attract the chief executives of research institutions, and or universities as the case may be, working with the chief executives of extension,



input agencies, agricultural financing agencies, processing firms, transporting agencies, end users of commodities, farmers associations and meteorological stations.

Members work together to foster innovations in the agricultural sector of the country, region or district. They meet and strategically determine the agricultural development agenda for the country or region or district and they may determine the location for activities or even commodities as determined by national/ regional /district plans or priorities.

Innovation Platforms that are set up at the grassroots levels are supposed to be different in focus. Although they source memberships from similar organizations, they target frontline staff from those organizations who facilitate operations at that level for their organizations. These usually are not Chief Executives but have the mandate of the Chief Executives. They participate in the activities of the

platform because of the relevance of their expertise to address a specific question on the platform. They therefore respond to the strategies set by the Platforms at the higher levels and transform those strategies to operations leading to higher impact. Innovation Platform at the grassroots level could also be referred to as Innovation Clusters (IC). Clusters may have similar agencies and also possibly some common memberships. A group, of clusters may also be responding to the same output market while a single cluster which is big enough may be built to respond to more than one output market. Clusters may also be set up to facilitate operations along different commodity chains.

The composition of IC may change in terms of institutions or in terms of expertise as the members review the implementation of the business plan and develop a new one. IC work is aligned with market chain and thus partners work together



on an identified commodity and/or system to meet a specific demand from an identified market in specific terms of quality and quantity. This is done in an atmosphere of collaboration among stakeholders in the commodity chain. Operations of the cluster may be enhanced through the introduction of information and communication tools to enhance communication among stakeholders. In essence, IP is different from IC, in that the IC members do hands-on work in the area of diagnosing, exploring, investigating solutions and facilitating their adoption. IP members, having determined strategic direction, are expected to later facilitate operations by providing relevant members from their institutions to join the IC at the grassroots levels. Both the strategic and the operational innovation platforms are needed by any country/ region/ district that wants to change its agricultural research system from the linear model to the multi-stakeholder model using the IAR4D model.

## How to establish a functional Innovation Platform for agricultural research and development

Innovation platforms can be set up in different ways. However, for it to be functional and effective, it must have cohesion, unite stakeholders on the commodity or system in which there is mutual interest, and with demonstrated or well-articulated potential to meet the interests of individuals on board.

**From our experiences, there are nine important steps to establish an operational innovation platform.**

### 1. Location of sites for activities:

This is vital and should be carried out with an analysis leading to the identification of opportunities and challenges in agricultural productivity in the location, site or community. Sometimes, the government or



governing research institutes dictate this to researchers as an unchangeable mandate.

**2. Identification of commodity or system of focus and analysis of its market chain.**

Like it is the case for the site of operation, the commodity may also be determined by either the government or the governing research institutes. The value chain analysis involves the exploration of the chain for the identification of actors and of challenges and opportunities for innovations. Analysis should cover areas of challenges and opportunities in productivity, NRM, policies, markets and product development as determined by gender considerations along the value chain.

**3. Identification/validation of stakeholders:** Partners on an innovation platform should essentially have a strong stake in the platform (a contribution and a clear benefit pattern); this sustains their participation. The potential partners should be determined from the value chain analysis. The real partners should be engaged with the output market as the fulcrum and with other partners engaged after an analysis of their capabilities as compared with the real needs on the platform. Partner engagement should start from identified and quantified output market and with reference to the needs for inputs, advisory services, processing, transportation, agricultural finance and insurance. All the players should be complemented with the representative of policy makers and meteorology. Engagement could be by direct formal or informal invitation.

**4. The engagement of researchers is vital on any IP.** They make significant contribution to the development of technologies along the commodity value chain. Researchers are represented by the core of researchers making direct contribution





to the research agenda which has been accorded the highest priority by the partners on the IP. Representations may change as the prioritization of research topics changes on the platform.

- 5. Development of governance and management guidelines.** IPs vary in the degree of formality. While informal IPs have loose regulations guiding operations, formal IPs develop a set of well-articulated guidelines. The orientation of the IP in terms of formality depends largely on the tradition of the people participating in the activities of the IP.
- 6. Facilitation of interaction of stakeholders (contacts, meetings, logistics, and communication channels).** It is anticipated that the facilitation of the IP should be devolved to the extension system; however any of the stakeholders could initiate an IP and facilitate the process.
- 7. Development of business plan by stakeholders.** The stakeholders on the platform all have equal rights to decision; as such the business plan should be agreed on by all.
- 8. Implementation of business plan.** This is undertaken by all partners and in line with the agreed-upon business plan.
- 9. Establishment of PM&E measures to draw lessons.** This process is vital as the IP could experience iterative learning along the pathway of generating innovation.
- 10. Review of implementation and lessons learning including review of business plan in response to lessons and re-assessment of priorities**



# Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Programme

The Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Programme (SSA CP) is an initiative of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA) which is the umbrella agency for numerous stakeholders of Agricultural Research and Development (ARD) in Africa.

The SSA CP aims to facilitate the achievement of substantially greater impact from agricultural research for development (AR4D), leading to improved rural livelihoods, increased food security and sustainable natural resource management, competitiveness in the agricultural sector throughout Sub Saharan Africa. The programme purposes to achieve these aims by fostering a paradigm change in the way agricultural research and development activities are conducted from the traditional linear approach to a more interactive multistakeholder approach packaged as IAR4D.

The IAR4D concept is premised on the innovation systems approach and requires systemic interaction among all stakeholders around specific commodity or production system. It entails a multi-sectorial orientation to agricultural problem diagnosis, and draws on integrated approaches using 'hard' and 'soft' sciences to provide solutions, while maximizing the available resources. The IAR4D concept uses the innovation platform as described in this handbill as its operational instrument.



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