

## **Choice-making in facilitation of agricultural innovation platforms in different contexts in West Africa: experiences from Benin, Ghana and Mali**

*Annemarie van Paassen, Laurens Klerkx, Richard Adu-Acheampong, Samuel Adjei-Nsiah, Bara Ouologuem, Elisabeth Zannou, Pierre Vissoh, Lassine Soumano, Fadiala Dembele and Mamoudou Traore*

Platforms provide an increased capacity for learning and coordinated innovation. The value of platforms for innovation is widely recognized, but more understanding is needed of the choices made in facilitation, to enable platforms to perform effectively within varying value chain contexts. This paper applies a comparative case study analysis of four innovation platforms in West Africa that aim to create institutional change for the benefit of smallholders. Each institutional context (emerging or developing value chain, a well-established value chain with more or less distortion by politics and rent-seeking behaviour) constituted a specific type of constraint and required different facilitation choices. Comparison showed that it is imperative for facilitators to have a clear platform purpose and design criteria, and good situation and actor analyses, and to interactively design small platforms, fit to create institutional change in a given context. Platforms need actors with capacities relating to the issue at stake, but also communicative qualities. Then there are situational facilitation choices: local level platforms need more structuring of deliberation, data-gathering, networking, and advocacy than higher level platforms. However, what emerged as essential for all was delicate mediation and dynamic agenda-setting. This created trust, relationships, and momentum for mutually supportive team action and institutional change.

**Keywords:** innovation platforms; facilitation; institutional change; small farmers; West Africa; Benin; Ghana; Mali

Concerns about the limited development impact of science-based, technology-driven development made agricultural development practitioners aware that innovation is not a linear research and development (R&D)-driven process, but rather depends on all actors involved in the production and use of the product as well as the constraining and enabling institutional context<sup>1</sup> (Hounkonnou *et al.* 2012). The innovation system literature notes the importance of networking and connectivity between heterogeneous groups of actors generating knowledge, funding, legitimation, and other resources to support technical, organizational, and institutional change for innovation.

Within the development community, innovation systems thinking and innovation platforms are presently receiving much attention as possible avenues for agricultural development; and a lot has been written on their facilitation (e.g. Ngwenya and Hagmann 2011). However, although it has been shown that platforms are dynamic and need to respond to emerging challenges in innovation processes, enabling the co-evolution of different elements in innovation (technologies, institutions, markets) (Hounkonnou *et al.* 2012; Kilelu *et al.* 2013), more understanding is needed regarding the choices made in facilitation, enabling platforms to perform effectively within varying value chain contexts.

This paper explores the experience of four orchestrated innovation platforms in different agricultural contexts of the Convergence of Science-Strengthening Innovation Systems (CoS-SIS) project, in Benin, Ghana, and Mali, funded from 2009 to mid 2014, that aims to test the value and feasibility of innovation platforms for creating institutional change for the benefit of smallholder farmers and processors (see Nederlof and Pyburn 2012; Hounkonnou *et al.* 2012 for an overview).

## **Theoretical framework**

The facilitation of innovation platforms requires a broad range of tasks, relating to problem-solving, learning, and negotiation, as well as group development processes. Most facilitation activities have a simultaneous effect on task performance and team development, which are intimately related but do not automatically evolve at the same pace or in a linear fashion. Critical facilitation tasks (adapted from Leeuwis 2004; Smits and Kuhlmann, 2004; Tennyson 2005; Halverson 2008; Van de Ven *et al.* 2008; Muro and Jeffery, 2008; Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011) include:

- Scoping and networking to identify the area of intervention and platform composition;
- Ensuring dialogue amongst platform members to establish relationships and a joint vision;
- Establishing the rules of conduct and collaboration;
- Enhancing fact-finding and development of possible solutions;
- Enhancing innovation performance: networking and communication for innovation.

We now further explore these tasks in depth.

### **Scoping and networking to identify the area of intervention and platform composition**

At the start of a multi-stakeholder process, potential members decide whether they want to join. Issues of concern include: the overriding purpose of membership; potential benefits and costs of membership; who is in and who is out (Halverson 2008). Facilitators' first task is the identification of an overriding purpose and partners with a matching stake plus complementary resources (Hoffmann and Schlosser 2001; Batterink *et al.* 2010).

### **Ensuring dialogue amongst platform members to establish relationships and a joint vision**

How parties negotiate and make commitments to innovation relations strongly influences the degree to which parties judge it equitable and efficient, and consequently their motivation

(Van de Ven *et al.* 2008: 126). Hence, at this stage it is critical that the facilitator ensures open dialogue and deliberation (a) to attain mutual understanding and to build relationships, and (b) to find common ground, a vision concerning the future and first priorities for action (Muro and Jeffrey 2008; Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011; Klerkx *et al.* 2012).

### **Establishing the rules of conduct and collaboration**

The overall purpose, platform composition, and demonstrated facilitator qualities (e.g. perceived trustworthiness, visibility, and accessibility) set the scene and the first level of trust and commitment of platform members. To further nurture trust, positive group interaction, and platform performance, it is essential to establish ‘rules of conduct’, such as for instance equal, open, and respectful communication, encouragement of deep reflection, confidentiality, and the possibility to opt out (Fichter and Beucker 2012).

### **Enhancing fact-finding and development of possible solutions**

Innovation is surrounded by uncertainty. A joint vision about the future reduces ambiguity, but it is important to continue the exposure and confrontation of ideas to improve the quality of a solution at the early period of innovation when investments have not accumulated beyond a point of ‘no return’ (Hey *et al.* 2007; Van de Ven *et al.* 2008).

#### *Enhancing innovation performance: networking and communication for innovation*

Constructive conflict helps to improve the quality of the learning in the platform, but also transforms an initially loose group of actors, submerged in past history, practices, and relationships, into an effective innovation platform (Sheard and Kakabadse 2002). This learning needs to transcend the platform, as others in the platform’s environment have to become engaged to enable change (Kilelu *et al.* 2013). Platform actors need to develop a web of cooperative relationships – thus removing institutional constraints – by engaging in awareness-raising, negotiation, or persuasion of their constituencies and/or powerful actors.

### **Research method**

To gain insight into choice-making to facilitate agricultural innovation platforms in various value chain contexts, we applied a comparative case study analysis of four platforms of the CoS-SIS project: an emerging value chain (dairy, Mali); a developing value chain (palm oil, Ghana); a well-established export value chain (cocoa, Ghana), and a well-established export value chain with considerable political interference and rent-seeking behaviour (Cotton, Benin). Following Hoholm and Araujo (2011), the findings in this study are based on a longitudinal tracking by some of the authors of developments in the studied cases, i.e. an innovation-ethnography. These authors were the Research Associates (RA) facilitating the platforms. An events analysis was done during the period 2010–2012 to see the choices made, the evolution of platform implementation, and the achievements over time. The information for this analysis was acquired through personal participation of the authors, informal interviews with platform members, as well as workshops in which platform members jointly reflected on the performance of the platform. Although the case study methodology does not

allow for statistical generalization, it does allow for analytical generalization, i.e. using previously developed theory as a template for comparison and reflection (Yin 2003).

## Findings

### Scoping to identify the area of intervention and platform composition

One of the aims of the CoS-SIS action-research project is to experiment with orchestrated multi-stakeholder platforms, to create institutional change for the benefit of smallholders (Hounkonnou *et al.* 2012). In 2008, researchers from reputable national research institutes in Benin, Ghana, and Mali were recruited to make a scoping study in various agricultural domains (government priority areas), and to identify key actors to initiate Concertation-and-Innovation Groups (CIGs). It was decided that CIG platforms should consist of interdependent actors, able to make key contributions to *institutional change* for the benefit of smallholder development. The CIGs would start with a core group of empowered farmer representatives, and *flexibly involve higher level actors*, up to 8 or 9 members critical to the implementation of the prioritized platform tasks. CIG members had to adhere to the CoS-SIS principles, be open-minded, and not self-centred, able to think outside the box, and not likely to disrupt the process. This led to two local level CIGs, one district-national level CIG, and one national level CIG (Table 1). While visiting the higher level organizations, all but one RA underscored the overall purpose ‘of creating *institutional change* for the benefit of smallholder development’.

### Platform formation

During the constituting workshop, the RAs simultaneously undertook two tasks: (a) establishing the rules of conduct for equitable and constructive communication, (b) enhancing deliberation about the issue-at-stake to create a joint vision and commitment. In each case, the RA presented the situation analysis and asked for critique and additions. They stressed that the stakeholders, and future CIG, were ‘in the driving seat’. The RA was there to support them. Open, constructive deliberation was needed, based on equality, respect, and trust, and with special consideration of smallholder interests. To demonstrate this, the RAs ensured that all participants gave their view on the presented situation analysis, after which they asked them to decide by consensus or let the smallholder representative select the main issues to tackle. In the dairy and the cotton case, the workshop participants agreed with the presented situation analysis; in the palm oil sector, a smallholder processor added a health and environmental issue; and in the cocoa sector, high level actors strenuously disputed the analysis and changed the focus from price-differentiation to an improved general farmer price.

When the platform priorities were set, the criteria for platform membership were explained before participants were invited to consider their participation in the platform. Actors assessed whether, given the CIG focus, priorities, and participation requirements, they were interested in joining, and a self-selection process emerged (Table 1).

**Table 1: Platform formation**

Emerging value chain (dairy/livestock integration in irrigation area of Office de Niger [ON] in Mali)	Developing value chain (palm oil, Ghana)	Well-established export value chain (cocoa, Ghana)	Established export value chain with considerable political interference and rent-seeking behaviour (cotton, Benin)
<b>First situation analysis</b>			
Main problems for dairy farming/livestock integration were (a) crop damage by livestock due to non-application of local resource use conventions, (b) lack of livestock infrastructure in ON, and (c) lack of professionalization, intensifying livestock production.	Poor processing techniques and quality of palm oil were main constraints to smallholders gaining access to export market.	A government platform (CoCobod) arranged credit, pest spraying gangs, farmer price, export marketing, etc. Farmers lacked knowledge and incentives to invest in quality cocoa production. Price differentiation, enhanced extension, and more timely delivery of inputs could improve farmer production.	In the cotton value chain, diminishing world market prices coupled with politics and traders' rent-seeking behaviour led to high prices and delayed delivery of pesticides, declining farm margins, and cotton production yields. Six technical, four economic, and four socio-institutional constraints were identified.
<b>Defined overall purpose:</b> To create institutional change for the benefit of smallholder development			
<b>Identified action and platform level</b>			
*To create space for dairy development, livestock farmers, village communities, and local authorities have to establish new farm practices and natural resource use conventions. *Local level (three village cooperatives) with support for value chain players, local administration, ON, and service providers in area.	*To improve smallholder palm oil production and processing to gain access to more lucrative export market. *District level (main smallholder production area) with support from relevant authorities at national level (as there were palm oil service providers at district level).	*To enhance an equitable, effective value chain governance with good incentives and information access for farmers, stimulating production with less waste *National level with high involvement of CoCobod bodies, which set regulations and procedures.	* To develop alternative production options for local cotton farmers, to ensure profitability. Start local to provide an example for other areas. *Local level (municipalities in main cotton production area who participated in pesticide experiment N'dali, Kandi and Didia) with support from local administration and service providers.
<b>Agreed platform priorities</b>			
Invited workshop participants prioritized village level awareness campaigns of local conventions and jurisprudence plus the popularization of intensive livestock production management.	In the stakeholder workshop, processors added the health and environmental problems relating to tyre burning (fuel for processing). The meeting prioritized palm oil quality and health/ environmental issues in relation to palm oil processing.	Workshop participants highlighted high quality of cocoa and rejected the proposed price differentiation and extension issue. After long discussion, the farmer price level and input distribution were selected as action points to increase farm production.	In the workshop, smallholder representatives had to select one action point per category: (tech.) introduce another farmer friendly cotton variety; (econ.) improve farmer price; (instit.) reduce input costs, via development of alternative pesticide (neem oil) that farmers can produce locally.
<b>Resulting platform composition</b>			
<i>Local level</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Farmer rep.: five dairy village cooperatives.</li> <li>Other: Local livestock production service (SLPIA), milk factory owner, organization of veterinarians, ON Niono area officer, General Secretary of Niono municipality, and NGO Faranci providing training and assistance in law and farmer organization.</li> </ul>	<i>District level</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Smallholder farmers, small-scale processors, mill owners who are also members of Kwaebibrim District Assembly.</li> <li>Other: District Officer Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA), scientists.</li> </ul> <i>National level</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ghana Export Promotion Authority (GEPA), Ghana Standards Authority (GSA), Ghana Regional Appropriate Technology Industrial Service (GRATIS), and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).</li> </ul> Not interested: export companies.	<i>National level</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Farmer rep.: Cocoa-Coffee-Sheanut Farmer Association and related cocoa input company, farmer-based marketing company Kuapa Kokoo.</li> <li>Other: the Ghana Cocoa Board (CoCoBod) with representatives of its research institute CRIG and Quality Control Company officers at national and regional level, researcher from Ghana Standards Authority; and the advisor of the Minister of Finance and Economics.</li> </ul> Not interested: private export companies.	Three collaborating local level platforms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Farmer rep.: experimental farmers, big farmer who is member National Agricultural Chamber.</li> <li>Other: agricultural extension office (CeRPA/CARDER), municipality, Agricultural Chamber, cotton revival project (PARFCB), cotton research centre (INRAB), cotton fibre processor N'Dali.</li> </ul> Not interested: association of private cotton ginners and traders (IAC)

Several actors stated that they joined the CIG because: 'I was impressed by the situation analysis and type of actors present in the workshop; here we could make a difference'. Many actors added that they enjoyed their participation 'as they learned' or 'enjoyed the intellectual debate'. Besides these generally shared feelings, different actors joined for different reasons. Smallholders had a real interest. Several stated that the CIG provided an opportunity to learn useful things for their enterprise. But they also had altruistic motives. Most recruited farmer representatives were known leaders with demonstrated leadership and communication qualities (e.g. former mayor, former teacher, member of the District Assembly, member of the syndicate), and they were eager to 'raise awareness and improve the living of their fellow farmers'. In Mali, a farmer representative said: 'The aim of the CIG is to reinforce collaboration; a fundamental way to create development and change the attitude of the population'. The high level farmer representative in the cocoa sector stated that a platform provided a rare opportunity: 'Now I was with people who usually sit at the other side of the table. This gave me the confidence that we could make a difference'.

For delegated officers from agricultural research and extension services, government authorities, quality control authorities, export promotions authorities, and environmental protection authorities, the situation was different. They joined because: 'the platform provides an opportunity to complement our services to the farmers'. Several also stated that they appreciated, and wanted to contribute to, this new development approach: 'The local level has to take the lead in development; we have interdependent interests; this is the place to tackle the constraints that individual providers cannot solve and it reinforces farmer organization.'

Value chain partners were less willing to join: in Benin, the cotton ginners and traders' association was reluctant and finally refused, and various export companies preferred not to get involved. In the palm oil sector, the CIG exerted a lot of effort to involve export companies willing to build market relations with smallholder processors, but several refused because of the extra investment costs involved. In the government-organized cocoa sector, a farmer association-related input company did join, stating that 'It is important for the company to be present in this setting, to also put our concerns on the political agenda.'

### **Ensuring constructive communication, learning, and performance**

The interactive procedure, used to amend the situation analysis and set priorities, triggered discussion and ensured agreement plus support for the CIG tasks from those who joined the platform. It did not, however, lead to the in-depth inquiry and dialogue needed to create mutual understanding. When the CIGs were formed, there was a sense of interdependency and focus, but various CIG members mistrusted each other or had doubts about whether such a heterogeneous group would be able to act. Depending on the initial group dynamics and context, the RAs used different facilitation capacities to ensure open and constructive communication and commitment at the start of the process (Table 2). They also set rules and devised different formats for meetings, fact-finding, and enactment of identified CIG priorities (Table 2). The CIGs met every month or two, depending on the momentum of the issue at hand. The organization of the meetings and actual facilitation of fact-finding and performance depended on the RAs' personality and position as well as on the perceived competences of the various CIG members.

**Table 2: Facilitating platform communication, effective fact-finding, and performance 2010–2013**

Local CIG, emerging dairy chain, Mali	Local CIG, politicized cotton chain, Benin	District level CIG, developing palm oil, Ghana	National level CIG, highly structured cocoa chain, Ghana
<b>Establishing rules of conduct, creating open communication and commitment at the start</b>			
From 1932 until recently, ON regulated farm production in the irrigation area in a top-down manner. The RA therefore had to repeatedly encourage farmers to open up to voice their problems, but ON officers should try not to feel accused 'as we need to know how things go within an office; we need critique to understand dynamics and solve them'.	In a politically tense situation, RA created trust by her insistence 'on keeping politics out of the CIG', focusing on 'a-political' technical solutions for the problems caused by higher level institutional constraints (weight procedure for cotton pricing; delayed and non-availability of pesticides).	Smallholders did not know the national actors so here there was no distrust, just the usual 'getting to know one another'.	High level officers became agitated by the CoS-SIS management who insisted on strict application of their financial rules and allowed the PhD to continue the research on a heavily debated issue. They felt 'not taken seriously'. The RA had to show humility, sensitivity, and flexibility to the needs of the actors to regain their commitment.
<b>Position RA to execute ongoing facilitation tasks</b>			
Experienced livestock researcher with good insight, interpersonal dynamics, and contacts with relevant resource persons, but his office was in the capital city, far from CIG.	Researcher was outsider of cotton value chain. Strong personality with back-up national coordinator for politically difficult issues. Office far from CIG.	Was outsider in domain, but previous action research experience and research position encouraged him to invest time in preparing, guiding, and coaching CIG members to maintain momentum.	Researcher from CoCobod Research Institute, so a trusted insider. Dynamic, diplomatic personality, who spends time preparing meetings, networking behind the scenes to maintain momentum.
<b>Establishing rules for collaboration, ensuring regular communication via meetings</b>			
The SLPIA officer acts as facilitator and overall coordinator; the veterinarian helps to moderate in periods of tension; both ensure translation Bambara–French and take the minutes. RA only intervenes to encourage silent members.	Rotating chairing and note-taking procedure for the meetings. RA is not always present, but informed via minutes, and mainly acts as coach and stimulating force.	Initially, RA organized and chaired the meetings, while PhD took notes, until programme required them to delegate. Now members take turns in chairing, and palm oil mill owner (retired teacher) takes the minutes.	Chairing is done by the highest officer, and in his absence other members take turns. All members are very busy, so the RA takes care of minutes and calls all members to check availability.
<b>Facilitating fact-finding: constructive information sharing for learning about issues and development of solutions</b>			
CIG members chair the meeting and use ordinary meeting procedures. RAs set the rule to take turns so that everybody can ventilate concerns, opinions, and ideas on all issues discussed. Smallholder members are eager to put forward issues of concern and knowledge of their own farm experience. They tend to explore issues via joint deliberation in the meeting, to gain oversight, or refine arguments for the development of solutions, which they subsequently use to inform and persuade their constituency. For issues that go beyond the farm level, such as breeding varieties, environmental impacts, legislation, higher level officers are better informed. They provide information and pose critical questions from their professional knowledge and experience. With support from the programme, study of legal text and experiments were undertaken to get information needed for large-scale awareness-raising and introduction of new farm practice.		RA prepares and structures the meetings in line with issue at hand: He invites officers of relevant authorities to inform the CIG, and organizes structured inquiry to calculate palm oil cost price, etc.	Minutes show a rich debate on every issue: farmer representatives see it as their responsibility to inform others of the farmers' situation. They or somebody else promotes an idea, and various actors come with critical concerns and additional information. They easily swap roles (promoter, critic, structuring discussion to the objective) and finally form a task force to gather data to be presented at the next meeting.
<b>Facilitating innovation performance: networking, awareness-raising for change amongst smallholders, lobby for regulatory change &amp; marketing:</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What was done</li> <li>• How it was facilitated</li> </ul>			
Four village meetings to explain legal text, and theatre about pros and cons of local practices and conflicts about natural resources management. Radio broadcasts.  Large workshop with authorities to adapt local conventions and infrastructure in ON. Juridical	Field experiment with new cotton variety.  Lobby for PhD experiment neem oil as alternative pesticide; execution experiment; training 30 women how to extract neem oil; promotion as alternative pesticide.	Various meetings by CIG to get cooperation of District Officers, District Assembly, and traditional chiefs for public debate and penalize the use of tyre burning for processing, which caused health and environmental problems.  PhD research shows how to	Data gathering on price formation mechanisms for cocoa in West Africa, persuading minister to increase farmer price by 33%.  Data gathering about input procurement and distribution, which led to improved transparency via newspaper

consultant prepares new legal text.  Experiments in fodder production and popularization of intensive livestock practices	CIG involvement stimulated influential members to take political action (e.g. joining forces to get a respected trader back into business; highlighting farmer problems at national meetings), but they always did it 'on their personal account'.	improve storage and processing techniques to enhance palm oil quality.  Various efforts to interest export companies in buying palm oil but cost price seems too high. Training processors in bookkeeping and investment; looking for funds to improve processing equipment.	announcements of deliveries, and finally Cocobod announces privatization.  Research on effectiveness of various pest management regimes.
Smallholder members take lead in awareness-raising campaign and deliberation, plus the popularization of intensive livestock practices. They need preparation to feel comfortable. RA and officers provide technical and other support needed.	Officers from extension, research and municipality (+ PhD) take lead in local farmer experiments. The CeRPA officers, together with the farmer secretary of Agr. Chamber, also put farmers' concerns on the national political agenda, but they do this 'on their personal account'.	First year, the RA and PhD structured meetings and coached smallholder representatives in their networking and awareness-raising campaigns. Last year, smallholder members started to take responsibility for meetings and organize training sessions on their own.	High level officers are well aware of complexity, sensitivity, and impact of new regulations. They have a high level of self-organization in gathering data, elaborating proposals, and networking. RA is there to introduce new issues and maintain momentum.

Note: Order of chains differs from Table 1 because of similarities found in two chains regarding fact-finding.

Facilitation performance depends on the fit between facilitation actions, ongoing team dynamics, and context. Table 2 shows different facilitation strategies for the different cases. At the start, when the rules of conduct were set, facilitators had to start with mediation. The palm oil sector in Ghana had not received much attention from government and authorities so far; hence, actors did not know one another and the RA could easily create exchange. In the Mali and Benin cases, farmers had long-lasting production problems caused by mismanagement. Here, the RAs repeatedly had to encourage farmers to express themselves but 'keep politics out', while pleading with the officers not to feel offended, but to constructively look at the issue at stake. At the national level, the RA's CIG mediation qualities were the most critical: he carefully had to manoeuvre between the CoS-SIS programme management and high level CIG members, redefining tasks and roles in such a way that key actors would be willing to work on value chain improvement.

To encourage equality and ownership, the CoS-SIS programme advised a rotating chairing and note-taking procedure for the meetings. RAs implemented this advice in a practical manner; members were invited to take this responsibility when they were able, and not too busy to perform this task. The main issue was to ensure that the CIGs met regularly. The RAs based far from the local CIGs identified a capable and committed Advisory Service Officer to monitor the activity level of the CIG and call upon the members to meet. At district and national CIG level, the RAs performed the task, as they had persuasive power vis-à-vis higher level actors to encourage them to attend meetings.

CIG information gathering and deliberation routines differed considerably. At the national CIG, high level officers were efficient deliberators: without any guidance they could quickly shift position to confront and integrate knowledge and always organized taskforces to gather data for evidence-based decisions. In other platforms, smallholder representatives (recruited for their communication and leadership qualities) were eager to share their experiential knowledge and concerns, whereas officers mainly added information from their expertise. In



meetings, members shared knowledge to gain oversight, and tease out problems and solutions. For complex issues, such as legal texts and quality measures, members mobilized actors in their network, or a consultant, to get the necessary information and develop appropriate proposals. We have no detailed communication analysis of the actual discussion dynamics in the local platforms, but the structuring done by the palm oil RA suggests that some guidance probably helped to enhance joint reflection

Similar to the CIG learning, local level CIGs needed more support and coaching in their performance than did the national CIG dealing with cocoa. When the national CIG had the information needed, the members were embedded well enough to easily inform and persuade key actors to organize change. The more local CIGs had a wider range of tasks. In all cases, smallholder representatives set themselves the task of creating awareness and change amongst their smallholder constituency and looked for help to find the right arguments, form (e.g. visualization), and opportunity to accomplish this task. As most local developments require external support, e.g. a supportive legal framework, investment funding, trading partners, these CIG also engaged in advocacy: smallholder members with additional positions (e.g. member of the Chamber of Agriculture, Parliament, etc.), officers, and RAs mobilized actors in their network, or hired consultants, to develop appropriate proposals and to lobby. For the cotton CIG in the rent-seeking environment, this type of lobbying was a sensitive matter, beyond the scope of the CIG, so members pursued it 'on their personal account'. One type of lobbying appeared to be extremely difficult: convincing export traders to invest in smallholders. Despite the RA's coaching assistance in all learning and performance tasks, the palm oil CIG did not manage to attract investors because of high cost involved.

The CIG achievements (Table 2) and timelines show that all four CIGs have accomplished several priority tasks within the first two years. CIG members noted that during the first year they were searching, exploring avenues, and not yet very confident about CIG performance. This changed when they accomplished their first institutional task. The success convinced them they were on the right track; members now appreciated their work, and there was positive group interaction: 'In the group, everybody now says everything as a friend and is devoted to the task'. 'We invite one another to personal celebrations'. 'Everybody is equal; we do things collectively; there is a good atmosphere to discuss and take decisions'.

## **Lessons learned**

Earlier studies indicate that platform identity and composition depend primarily on the platform design, and that facilitation is decisive in establishing positive group interaction: trust and enthusiastic group climate; adequate, informal, open communication; balanced and well-coordinated contributions; devoted efforts and mutual support. From the different cases, we distil the following design and facilitation lessons:

### **Platform formation**

- Keep it small to be effective. Rather than starting different platforms at various scale levels, or sector-wide platforms, the study demonstrated that small platforms are able to create institutional change. Small platforms with key actors from various scale levels are easier to manage, will engender more participant-owned, informal, flexible, and timely operation in tackling the main priorities and swiftly react to emerging challenges (Provan and Kenis 2007).
- To start, facilitators need a clear vision of the overall purpose, member selection criteria, and facilitation of platforms, to ensure that platforms are able to make key contributions to institutional change for the benefit of the smallholder. This requires not a neutral, but rather a critical, reflexive stance to delicately balance between smallholder needs and interests of the more powerful (Barnaud and Van Paassen 2013). The CoS-SIS programme struggled for a whole year before these issues were clearly defined and facilitators knew how to proceed.
- Our study underlines the importance of quality scoping studies. Scoping studies provide insight into recurrent value chain problems, underlying institutional causes, and the actors, their interests, mind set, competences, and communicative actions. This enables a platform initiator to define a pertinent platform focus and mobilize actors with relevant competences.
- Take care to recruit platform members with representative capacities, expertise, and operational capabilities with respect to the issue at hand, *and* personal characteristics such as open-mindedness, dynamism, and communicative qualities. They can help the facilitator when needed. All four CIGs attained institutional successes and had various innovation champions, who enthusiastically promoted progress through critical stages (2013 *et al.* in press.).

### **Facilitation**

- Notwithstanding the quality of the preliminary work, it is essential to leave space for the actors to adapt the situation analysis. The study showed that the interactive start ensured a clear, context-appropriate functional identity and motivation for platform members to join (Fichter and Beucker 2012). However, there is a risk that the platform will fail to attract the support of non-interested chain actors, key to solving the issue at stake (van Mierlo *et al.* 2013). In such cases, it was platform policy to make an extra effort to motivate these actors to join. If this failed, interpersonal relationships and informal networking might help to get the timely support needed.
- In most domains, actors' interests are highly divergent. A clear delineation of the overall purpose and 'rules of conduct' helps to create 'a coalition of the willing', but facilitators should be aware that delicate mediation is crucial to create enough trust and commitment for the start of the process.
- Local level platforms need a considerably different kind of facilitation than high level platforms. The study showed that actors in high level platforms have a high capacity for fact-finding: they easily switch perspectives to confront, tease out arguments, gather evidence, and develop constructive proposals for change. They are well embedded to network via formal or informal links to persuade key actors to implement change. The main facilitation tasks for these platforms are mediation and process monitoring, to keep a dynamic agenda. In the more local level platforms, facilitators have a more

comprehensive role: to support smallholders to give voice to their concerns, to mediate and structure deliberations into constructive reflection and learning, to support data gathering and experimentation to attain robust knowledge on the proposed solution, and to coach smallholders during awareness-raising campaigns. These tasks are especially important at the start, e.g. the first year, when the platform learns-by-doing, but after a while facilitators can start to delegate tasks and act as coach, stimulating reflexivity, in the background.

When we compare the platform facilitation activities executed in CoS-SIS (Table 3) with our theoretical framework, we note the RAs did not invest in dialogue, which requires considerable time and delicate inquiry techniques, but opted for a discussion and interactive determination of platform focus and composition. This might explain the generally low level of trust at the start of the process, obliging RAs to invest considerably in mediation and in encouraging smallholders ‘to raise their voice’. Furthermore, the case comparison shows that facilitators had different levels of involvement in the fact-finding and innovation process, but all needed to ensure regular face-to-face communication and a dynamic agenda to keep the momentum for institutional change. Some RAs took this as one of their main responsibilities. Others delegated this task to local Advisory Officers.

**Table 3: Critical path of Cos-SIS platform facilitation tasks: musts and choices in context**

Platform formation	Facilitating platform functioning	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opt for one small platform with representative qualities</li> <li>• Scoping study to propose platform focus and composition</li> <li>• Interactive determination of CIG focus and composition</li> <li>• Establish rules of conduct</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mediation</li> <li>• <i>Ensure smallholder concerns are voiced and considered</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure regular face-to-face meetings and dynamic agenda</li> <li>• <i>Structure fact-finding for learning</i></li> <li>• <i>Coach smallholders in organization of awareness and capacity building of smallholder constituency</i></li> <li>• <i>Coach or support networking for information gathering and lobbying</i></li> </ul>

Italics: Choice in context

CoS-SIS worked with researchers as facilitators. This had some advantages: firstly, researchers produced quality scoping studies and were able to identify key players to participate at the first platform meeting. Secondly, local as well as higher level actors respect researchers as informed impartial sparring partners; this is a good position from which to act as mediator. The main disadvantage is the limited availability of scientists. In our study, not all RAs were available for intensive facilitation of local platforms; hence, they delegated the chairing of meetings to local members. In Mali, the SPLIA officers, trained in participatory communication, ensured in-depth exchange of opinions amongst all, to really resolve the issues at hand. In Benin the RA prioritised equality and ownership of the CIG leadership, so officers and farmers teamed up to take turns in presiding the meetings; hence it depended on the personalities whether they applied a more leading or facilitative style of discussions. In both cases the RA acted as observant participant and coach while present. They informally inquired whether everybody felt taken serious and satisfied with ongoing discussions, and

encouraged members to call them by phone to express concerns when needed. In principle, it seems logical to divide facilitation tasks amongst trained researchers, local advisory agents, and capable local members, but more research is needed on the effect of various forms of task division on internal group dynamics, on the quality of fact-finding, and on institutional performances.

## Conclusions

To enhance innovation for the benefit of smallholders in rural Africa, more understanding is needed about facilitation requirements and choices, enabling orchestrated platforms to perform effectively within varying value chain contexts (Hall *et al.* 2010). Comparison of the Cos-SIS cases shows that some facilitation tasks were imperative for all cases: facilitators needed a clear overall purpose and platform design criteria, and quality situation and actor analyses, to interactively create small platforms, fit to create institutional change in various value chain contexts. A good facilitator is crucial, especially at the start, but we should not underestimate the role of platform members. It is therefore essential to recruit actors with representative and issue-related expertise and operational capacities, coupled with communicative qualities, open-mindedness, and dynamism. These latter qualities ensure a positive drive for learning and change, within and beyond the platform. Depending on CIG composition and tasks, the facilitators more or less structured the deliberation, the data-gathering, the networking, the lobbying, and the awareness-raising campaigns. Politically sensitive contexts limited the scope of platform discussions, but seemed to inspire members to engage in strategic diplomacy. What emerged as essential for all, however, was delicate mediation and dynamic agenda-setting to create trust, relationships, and momentum for mutually supportive team action.

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### **About the authors**

*Annemarie van Paassen* is assistant professor in International Rural Development at the Knowledge Technology & Innovation Group at the Wageningen University. After her MSc she worked 11 years in Africa, coordinating and coaching community development- and agricultural extension officers. For her PhD research, she studied 'computer enhanced learning for natural resource management'. Present research and teaching focuses on: social learning, negotiation and conflict management in multilevel innovation processes; the use of boundary-spanning tools; inter- and trans-disciplinary research; science communication; the role of (collaborative) research in innovation processes.

Annemarie van Paassen, Knowledge Innovation & Technology (KTI) group, Wageningen University, PO Box 8130, 6700 EW Wageningen. E-mail: [Annemarie.vanPaassen@wur.nl](mailto:Annemarie.vanPaassen@wur.nl)

*Laurens Klerkx* is associate professor at the Knowledge, Technology and Innovation Group of Wageningen University. His research and teaching takes place in the realm of agriculture and focuses on: changes of agricultural research and extension systems towards demand-driven systems; newly emerging intermediary structures for matching demand and supply for knowledge and facilitation of multi-stakeholder collaboration for innovation (innovation brokers); how innovation brokers affect innovation; the dynamics of innovation networks and role divisions in innovation networks.

van Paassen, A., L. Klerkx, R. Adu-Acheampong, S. Adjei-Nsiah, B. Ouologuem, E. Zannou, P. Vissoh, L. Soumano, F. Dembele and M. Traore. 2013. Paper. Choice-making in facilitation of agricultural innovation platforms in different contexts in West Africa: experiences from Benin, Ghana and Mali. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 9(3): 79-94 <http://journal.km4dev.org/>

Laurens Klerkx , Knowledge Innovation & Technology (KTI) group, Wageningen University, PO Box 8130, 6700 EW Wageningen. E-mail: Laurens.Klerkx@wur.nl

*Samuel Adjei-Nsiah* is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Agricultural Research, University of Ghana, Legon. He holds a PhD in Production Ecology and Resource Conservation from Wageningen University and Research Centre, the Netherlands. His current area of research includes facilitating institutional change in smallholder agriculture, climate change and food security. He has professional skills in participatory action research and facilitation of multi-stakeholder processes.

Samuel Adjei-Nsiah, College of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences, University of Ghana, PO Box 68, Legon, Accra, Ghana. E-mail: y\_nsiah@yahoo.co.uk

*Richard Adu-Acheampong* is a Commonwealth Scholar with a PhD in biology from Imperial College, London. His research interests centre on insect pest–pathogen interactions, and he has been involved with the development of sustainable pest management strategies in cocoa ecosystems. The results of his master’s degree at the University of Ghana in 1997 laid the foundation for the national use of neem seed extracts to control insect pests in organic cocoa farms. Richard now facilitates several years an innovation platform for cocoa in Ghana. Richard Adu-Acheampong , Cocoa Research Institute of Ghana, PO Box 8, Tafo-Akim, Ghana. E-mail r.aduacheampong@yahoo.co.uk

*Bara Ouologuem* earned his PhD in animal nutrition in 1987 at the Timiryazev Agricultural Academy, Moscow. Since 1988, he has worked as a researcher in animal production at the Rural Economy Institute (Institut d’Economie Rurale, IER). Since 1997 he has managed a course on applied statistical methods in livestock at the Rural Polytechnic Institute for Training and Applied Research, as well as training on scientific writing. In CoS-SIS project, he is the associate researcher in the field crop–livestock integration.

Bara Ouologuem, Rural Economy Institute, Sotuba Agronomy Research Station, BP 262, Bamako, Mali. E-mail: ouologuembara@yahoo.fr

*Elisabeth Zannou* holds a PhD in entomology, and her main field is pest control. She is registered with the African and Malagasy Council for Higher Education (CAMES). She has worked with many projects, including on non-timber forest products in partnership with INBio, Costa Rica. She has considerable experience in the use of insects as human food, and provides consultancy services in this area. For her post-doc, she is working with the CoS-SIS programme on cotton.

Elisabeth Zannou , Faculty of Agronomic Sciences, University of Abomey-Calavi, 01 POB 526, Cotonou 00229, Benin. E-mail: ezannou2@yahoo.fr, fsa-uac@bj.refer.org

*Pierre Vissoh* is a lecturer at the University of Abomey-Calavi. He holds a PhD in social sciences from Wageningen University, the Netherlands, and the University of Abomey-Calavi, Benin. His main field is extension and communication. He has worked for the Sasakawa Global 2000 project to improve soil fertility and maize crop productivity in Benin and Togo. He is also involved in a project on climate change. He is working with the CoS-SIS programme on oil palm for his post-doc.

van Paassen, A., L. Klerkx, R. Adu-Acheampong, S. Adjei-Nsiah, B. Ouologuem, E. Zannou, P. Vissoh, L. Soumano, F. Dembele and M. Traore. 2013. Paper. Choice-making in facilitation of agricultural innovation platforms in different contexts in West Africa: experiences from Benin, Ghana and Mali. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 9(3): 79-94 <http://journal.km4dev.org/>

Pierre Vissoh , Faculty of Agronomic Sciences, University of Abomey-Calavi, 01 POB 526, Cotonou 00229, Benin. E-mail [pierrevissoh@yahoo.fr](mailto:pierrevissoh@yahoo.fr), [fsa-uac@bj.refer.org](mailto:fsa-uac@bj.refer.org)

*Lassine Soumano* is an engineer, specialized in river hydrology. He studied at the Polytechnic Institute of Odessa in Ukraine, and earned his MSc and PhD degree at the State Technical University of St Petersburg. Upon his return to Mali in 1994, he taught at the National School of Engineers of Bamako, then became a professor and is now director at IPR/IFRA in Katibougou. Apart from his teaching and research, he also does consulting in the field of rural development in Mali and elsewhere in West Africa.

Lassine Soumano, Institut Polytechnique Rural de Formation et de Appliquée (IPR/IFRA), BP 06, Katibougou-Koulikoro, Mali. E-mail: [ipr-ifra@ipr-ifra.org](mailto:ipr-ifra@ipr-ifra.org), [lsno2002@yahoo.fr](mailto:lsno2002@yahoo.fr)

*Fadiala Dembele* has a PhD from the University of Marseille III, Saint Jerome, France. He specializes in the ecology of Sudano-Sahelian savannah ecosystems. He coordinates research activities on desertification in Mali for the national environmental surveillance mechanism (DNSE), the Sahara and Sahel Observatory (OSS) and ROSELT; the Sahelian Savanna Disturbance Experiment.

Fadiala Dembele, Institut Polytechnique Rural de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée (IPR/IFRA), BP 06, Koulikoro, Mali. E-mail: [faddembele@yahoo.fr](mailto:faddembele@yahoo.fr)

*Mamoudou Traore* is an agronomist with a PhD in tropical plant biology from the University of Pierre et Marie Curie (ParisVII), France. He is assistant director general and researcher/lecturer at IPR/IFRA, and at the Faculty of Science and Technology of the University of Bamako, Mali. He works in the fields of ethnobotany, wild food plants, medicinal plants and weed science.

Mamoudou Traore, Institut Polytechnique Rural de Formation et de Recherche Appliquée (IPR/IFRA) de Katibougou, BP 06, Koulikoro, Mali. E-mail: [mamoudoutraore@yahoo.fr](mailto:mamoudoutraore@yahoo.fr)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Institutions refer to the 'sets of rules that exists to reduce uncertainty in human interaction' (North 1990: 17). They comprise 'hard' institutions such as formal laws, policies, and procedures as well as 'soft' institutions such as values, informal norms, and practices.