

## EDITORIAL

### **The unusual suspect? The private sector in knowledge partnerships for agricultural and rural development**

#### **Rationale**

In September 2015, the member states of the United Nations (UN) General Assembly agreed on Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a transformational programme to address the problems facing the global community, including poverty, gender inequality, and climate change (UN, 2015). It is widely considered that to achieve this ambitious agenda, global efforts will need to involve and harness the private sector. Against this background, the private sector is receiving increasing prominence in agricultural and rural development. Not only small businesses in the global South but also multinationals are being courted by bilateral and multilateral development agencies, like the US Agency for International Development (USAID, 2020) and the UN itself (UN Joint Inspection Unit, 2017), as a way to increase the impact of public funds. The CGIAR, identifying itself as ‘the world’s largest global agricultural innovation network’<sup>1</sup> considers partnering with the private sector as a strategic opportunity for impact at scale and to contribute to the SDGs (CGIAR, 2020). This emphasis is part of a ‘rapidly deepening normative discourse that positions the private sector as an active development agent’ (McEwan et al, 2017: 29), potentially seeing the private sector as the ‘magic bullet’ to solve development problems. In this Special Issue, we recognise this growing normative discourse – also discussed by Marie Hur and Liora Stührenberg’s paper on governance of food and nutrition security policy in this issue – but, through research, we also want to examine critically what the private sector has to offer global development in terms of knowledge management. Against this background, appropriate efforts and mechanisms to work in concert with private enterprise are crucial.

A widely shared view across policy, academia and civil society considers that societal transformations towards more sustainable and just socio-ecological systems require a different way of thinking of and engaging with, the private sector (Scheyvens et al. 2016). This means that the global development community, including both policymakers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and scientists need to reflect on how they work and partner with private actors – including small and medium enterprises (SMEs), multinational companies, financial institutions, and foundations among others – to move beyond ‘business as usual’ (Spangenberg, 2013). The need for transformation for achieving the SDGs is crucial in agri-food systems (Klerkx & Begemann 2020), although multiple pathways for engaging a diverse range of stakeholders – including the private sector – exist and are contested (Cummings et al. 2019a; Dentoni et al. 2017).

Knowledge is viewed through its transformative power within, in particular, contexts of extreme poverty where, for example it has been analyzed as requiring boundary work to facilitate its exchange (Qureshi et al, 2018). Although development discourse often sees knowledge as an antidote to poverty, processes of creation and exchange of knowledge for development needed to be examined. For example, in the case of grassroot development, it is shown that different types of knowledge processes are being supported by different social capital dynamics at the community level (Cummings et al, 2019b). Taking informed and commonly understood decisions on how to transform partnerships towards the achievement of the SDGs requires deep reflection and experimentation on how knowledge is managed and co-created among multiple stakeholders (van Ewijk and Ros-Tonen 2021), including for-profit actors (Dentoni et al. 2018). In spite of the need of transforming private sector engagements in international development, the role of the private sector in knowledge brokering and knowledge partnerships has not received much attention from researchers (Cummings et al, 2020). Empirical evidence shows that while the private sector's roles in knowledge partnerships and brokering for the SDGs are versatile, companies' resource investments focus primarily in supporting knowledge uptake in ways that are largely driven by self-interest (Kiwanuka et al, in this issue). This is a problem because the private sector, as well as their public and not-for-profit partners, might miss the chance to co-develop knowledge management systems (Carrillo et al. 2009) that are truly effective in achieving the SDGs (Caiado et al. 2018).

Given this knowledge gap, this Special Issue focuses specifically on contributions on how the private sector, through the design and organization of partnerships that strive to move beyond 'business as usual', contributes - or fails or struggles to contribute - to transform agricultural and rural development towards the achievement of the SDGs. The contributions to this Special Issue are diverse in terms of geographical location (South East Asia, Europe and Africa, Benin, Ghana, Kenya and Rwanda) but also in terms of themes: value chains, knowledge management strategies, research processes, knowledge brokering, institutional spaces, knowledge networks and governance. A number of the contributions to the Special Issue provide examples of how collaboration between the private sector and other actors, including marginalized women and small farmers, can be facilitated and give value to research processes and in terms of scaling up innovations. As the next section illustrates, the contributions that we attracted and co-developed with the authors include analytical frameworks, typologies of partnerships, benchmarking practices and mapping of the intellectual assets of the private sector. The contributions do not lead to the immediate conclusion that the private sector is a 'magic bullet' in global development. Instead, they lead to the conclusion that the private sector does have a role to play but that this role requires facilitation and brokerage to be effective.

The final contribution has not been accepted as part of the Special Issue as it relates to the knowledge management implications of the coronavirus. However, there is no doubt that the

pandemic itself is a game changer, impacting on the relationship between all actors, knowledge management and global development.

## **Papers**

The first paper, ‘Can the private sector help deliver improved technology to cassava smallholders in South East Asia?’ (Jonathan Newby, Dominic Smith, Rob Cramb, Cu Thi Le Thuy, Laothao Youabee, Chea Sareth, Sophearith Sok, Chanphasouk Tanthaphone, Wani Hadiutomo, Lê Việt Dũng, Nguyễn Văn Nam) argues that despite successful public sector research conducted with farmers over several decades, translating these research outputs into widespread adoption by farmers has had mixed success. To consider whether private sector actors in the cassava industry can have a greater role in knowledge transfer, the authors have developed a framework based on characteristics of the cassava value chain. This framework is used to analyse six contrasting case studies from four South East Asian countries, ranging from underdeveloped value chains around small-scale processing of animal feed to highly-commercialized international value chains for starch. Analysis indicates that the private sector is not a panacea for generating research impacts at scale. In all cases, they found that support from a knowledge broker, such as a public sector or non-governmental actor with the capacity to work with farmers, is also required.

Next, ‘Knowledge management unlocks market systems and empowers women farmers in Bangladesh’ (Albaab Ur-Rahman, Emily Janoch, Prabodh Devkota) explains how CARE Bangladesh engaged with the private sector to create gender-sensitive inclusive business solutions that benefit both market actors and women from marginalized communities in agriculture. CARE worked collaboratively with women producers and the private sector to come to solutions that would not have been possible from one perspective alone. The approach is exemplified in two case studies which focus on fresh dairy market systems and financial inclusion of women smallholder farmers respectively. The strategic architecture of knowledge management was employed to bring these actors together with a shared vision of mutual benefit to develop market-based solutions, manage private sector partnerships and help communities overcome gender and economic barriers.

Third, ‘The private sector in knowledge processes and partnerships for food and nutrition security in the Global South: a case study from the Dutch Food and Business Applied Research Fund programme’ (Frejus Thoto, Mawuna Donald Houessou, Corinne Lamain, Rodrigue C. Gbedomon) considers that for-profit actors can bring value to research processes and knowledge development. However, the collaborations come with challenges related to goals and interests, implementation approach, and marketing strategies. The outcomes of such collaborations may be mixed and, in some cases, lead to results that do not include the most food insecure. Partnerships that include the private sector should be cognizant of the possible challenges and proactively define approaches that leverage the private sector to add value to food and nutrition security outcomes.

The fourth paper, ‘The private sector as the “unusual suspect” in knowledge brokering for international sustainable development: a critical review’ (Suzanne Kiwanuka, Sarah Cummings, Barbara Regeer) draws on Glegg and Hoens’ (2016) meta-framework of knowledge brokering to analyse the role of the private sector in knowledge brokering in Europe and Africa. It establishes that the private sector’s roles are versatile, extending beyond connecting research evidence to potential users, to connecting researchers to funding opportunities and to other researchers, and to hosting platforms. The private sector actively invests resources to facilitate knowledge uptake, although this is to a large extent driven by self-interest. Perceived self-interests remain a barrier to knowledge brokering with the private sector not always being seen as a trusted partner.

Next, ‘Multi-stakeholder dialogue space on farmer-led irrigation development in Ghana: an instrument driving systemic change with private sector initiatives’ (Thai Minh, Olufunke Cofie, Nicole Lefore and Petra Schmitter) explores how multi-stakeholder dialogues can capitalize on and trickle systemic change through private sector involvement. Analysis from the farmer-led irrigation development multi-stakeholder dialogue space (FLI-MDS) in Ghana shows the need for a physical and institutional space to cater for and merge different stakeholder interests. For all stakeholders, the institutional space is a multi-level-playing institution which can trickle systemic change by leveraging the private sector’s investments with multi-stakeholder collaboration, interactive learning, and potential support for commercial scaling of FLI. For private sector actors, a physical space for collaboration is crucial.

Sixth, ‘The implication of the international private sector in the governance of food security in Africa: dissemination of a new agricultural development paradigm’ (Marie Hur and Liora Stührenberg) argues that the involvement of international private actors has changed the architecture of food and nutrition security governance, now marked by the proliferation of hybrid spaces in which international firms and philanthropic foundations play a leading role. The very strong connection of the actors involved in these multi-actor platforms and the variation of these platforms at different scales (international, regional, national) ensures dissemination of ideas which emphasize the modernization of African agriculture, based on commercial agriculture and a model of Green Revolution with strong capital mobilization and an emphasis on financial profitability.

The final paper, ‘Does participation of agricultural entrepreneurs in knowledge networks improve firm performance in Benin?’ (Fréjus S. Thoto, Rodrigue C. Gbedomon, Mawuna Donald Houessou, Augustin Aoudji, and Barthelemy G. Honfoga) analyses data from 819 entrepreneurs to consider the impact of participation in knowledge networks on firm performance. Findings show that agricultural entrepreneurs use both formal and informal knowledge networks, although informal networks are used with more intensity. The authors

found that participation in these knowledge networks is influenced by age, gender, education level, and sector of activities. This study provides critical information for institutions that are active in encouraging or crowding out the involvement of the private sector in agricultural and rural development.

### **Other contributions**

The case study, ‘Knowledge as catalyst: using knowledge exchange and learning to commercialize a public agricultural research idea for Kenyan and Rwandan smallholder farmers’ (Laura Ostenso and Laura Harwig) illustrates dynamics of a multi-year agricultural technology partnership between Feed the Future Partnering for Innovation, a United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-funded programme implemented by Fintrac Inc., and Purdue University, USA. The partnership aimed to scale use of an improved grain storage bag to reduce postharvest loss among smallholder farmers in Kenya and Rwanda. The case presents a set of knowledge exchange touchpoints to facilitate collaboration between publicly funded research institutions and private sector businesses in successfully and sustainably scaling innovative agricultural technologies.

The Reflection, ‘Disentangling challenges in mainstreaming smallholder farmers perspectives into knowledge co-creation processes: evidence from Benin’ (Mawuna Donald Houessou and Frejus Thoto) considers that although smallholders form most agri-food value chains, their voices and idiosyncrasies are little consulted and accounted for in policymaking. Efforts to improve such situations are ongoing but face operational challenges, usually context-specific, that the literature fails to identify. This reflection addresses the knowledge gap and discusses how to effectively engage smallholders in critical discussions regarding the sustainable transformation of agriculture.

Finally, the Community Note, ‘Knowledge management and the coronavirus pandemic: an online discussion’ (Chris Zielinski) analyses the online discussion on ‘knowledge management and the coronavirus’ which took place between 30 March and mid-June 2020 on the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) discussion list, made up of 80 contributions from 30 participants.

### **Conclusions and way forward**

Taking stock from the contributions of this Special Issue, we highlight two fundamental points on how the private sector can contribute, through knowledge partnerships and brokerage, to transformations towards the achievement of the SDGs. The first point concerns scaling of sustainable solutions, while the second point entails the nexus of learning and inequality. These insights are consistent with the fifth generation of knowledge management for development (KM4D) with its emphasis on the development knowledge system and

ecology, featuring multiple knowledge, multi-stakeholder process and global public goods, against a background of emergence and complexity (Cummings et al, 2013).

First, we overall found that the scaling of sustainable solutions – generally facilitated by the public sector but also by NGOs – requires the design of appropriate knowledge systems, hence of knowledge brokerage by actors commonly perceived as not driven by self-interest. In the cassava sector of South-East Asia, for example, Newby and colleagues (in this Special Issue) found that public or non-government actors were necessary knowledge brokers to scale improved farming technologies because of their built trust with farmers. The private sector, and especially large multinational entities, were found to have the resources and core competencies to create physical and virtual spaces for knowledge exchange (Minh et al.; Hur and Stührenberg; Kiwanuka et al, in this Special Issue), thus to contribute to the foundation of these knowledge systems. Yet, once created, these spaces need everyday organization and orchestration from actors that are commonly perceived by stakeholders to act in the public interest (Kiwanuka et al., in this Special Issue). In particular, these spaces need to be organized in support of those actors with less resources to participate to knowledge partnerships (Houessou and Thoto, in this Special Issue). Moreover, the timing of knowledge exchange within these spaces is particularly important to develop effective knowledge systems that scale sustainable solutions (Ostenso and Harwig, in this Special Issue).

This first overarching finding adds insight to the recent theory and practice of scaling of sustainable innovations (Schut et al. 2020). That is, knowledge management – both in terms of designing structures for knowledge sharing and co-creation, as well as in terms of everyday brokerage – plays a critical role in steering the scaling processes. Thus, not only knowledge systems per se, but also their governance, need to be designed and organized in partnerships between actors pursuing both private and public interests (Dentoni et al. 2018; van Ewijk and Ros-Tonen 2021). This realization leads to the following questions that can be more specifically addressed in future practice and research:

- How can knowledge management be organized among multiple stakeholders – including public and private – during processes of scaling of sustainable solutions?
- Which technologies effectively support processes of knowledge-sharing at scale, both in terms of virtual and physical spaces and channels for communication and storing/access data and information?
- Which practices effectively support stakeholder inclusion in the knowledge-sharing processes at scale? For example, how can resource-scarce stakeholders viably participate and have their voices heard in knowledge sharing and co-creation?

Second, knowledge sharing and co-creation at scale may trigger stakeholder learning processes that may be profoundly unequal. In particular, some stakeholder may learn more rapidly, innovate and empower themselves through knowledge partnerships (Thoto,

Gbedomon et al., in this Special Issue). Yet, others may fail to do so because of their learning environment might not be favorable, despite the knowledge management efforts that might have been put in place (Thoto, Houessou et al., in this Special Issue). Evidence shows that these learning disparities can be effectively addressed at project or programme scale (Ur-Rahman et al, in this Special Issue), but they may persist when scaled at a national or regional level, therefore explaining the mixed success in the uptake of sustainable solutions at scale (Newby et al., in this Special Issue). These learning disparities become even more evident as exogenous shocks – such as the coronavirus pandemic as a global health emergency – force the less resilient stakeholders to focus primarily on short-term needs rather than investing in long-term knowledge acquisition and learning processes (Zielinski, in this Special Issue).

This second overarching result contributes to explaining why multi-stakeholder knowledge partnerships might not lead necessarily to effective processes of multi-stakeholder innovation (Sartas et al. 2018). This means that inequality in learning environments and opportunities may lead some stakeholders, in particular the more resource-constrained and least resilient ones, to benefit the least from knowledge partnerships and brokerage. This finding resonates with recent literature that suggests that social network embeddedness might fuel inequalities in stakeholder learning and innovation (Beaman and Dillon 2018), and therefore more attention needs to be put on how power structures and informal institutions may shape learning inequalities in multi-stakeholder platforms (Iza et al. 2020). This reflection suggests the following questions:

- Is it necessary for responsible scaling initiatives to reduce learning inequalities among stakeholders?
- To what extent are learning inequalities linked to socio-economic inequalities and inequalities related to power?
- Can the scaling of sustainable solutions towards the achievement of SDGs can take place effectively without reducing stakeholder learning inequalities?
- How can knowledge brokerage and training/education institutions reduce processes of stakeholder learning inequality?
- How can private, public and non-profit actors complement the work of knowledge partnerships to reduce stakeholder learning inequalities at scale?

Enjoy the reading of this Special Issue contributions and please reach out to us and the KM4Dev community to foster and steer this important conversation with us in the years to come.

*Sarah Cummings, Domenico Dentoni, Jorge Chavez-Tafur, Suzanne Kiwanuka,  
Jana Körner, Anastasia Seferiadis, and Simone Staiger*  
Guest Editors

### **About the Guest Editors**

*Jorge Chavez-Tafur* is a Senior Editor at the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*. As Knowledge Management Officer at the Centre for Technical Agriculture and Rural Cooperation (CTA), the Netherlands, in the Learning, Monitoring and Evaluation Unit, he is the coordinator of its experience capitalization project. He was previously Editor of *LEISA Revista de Agroecología* and Editor-in-Chief of *Farming Matters*.

Email: [j.chavez.tafur@gmail.com](mailto:j.chavez.tafur@gmail.com)

*Sarah Cummings* is the Editor-in-Chief of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* which she founded with 2005. She is currently working as Researcher, Public-Private Partnerships at the Knowledge, Technology and Innovation group at Wageningen University and Research (WUR), The Netherlands. Her contribution to this Special Issue was funded by the NWO-WOTRO CGIAR-NL Research Programme ‘Improving the effectiveness of public-private partnerships within the CGIAR: knowledge sharing for learning and impact.’

Email: [sarahcummingswork@gmail.com](mailto:sarahcummingswork@gmail.com)

*Domenico Dentoni* is Full Professor in Business, Resilience and Transformation, Montpellier Business School, France, and Adjunct Professor at the Business Management & Organization Group, WUR. His research focuses on new forms of organization that trigger learning and change, and thus address wicked problems around food and agriculture. His contribution to this Special Issue was funded thanks to the NWO-WOTRO Senior Expert Program as part of the project titled “Entrepreneurial Learning in Inclusive Agribusiness” (ELIA).

Email: [domenico.dentoni@wur.nl](mailto:domenico.dentoni@wur.nl)

*Suzanne Kiwanuka* is Senior Lecturer in Health Policy Planning and Management at Makerere University School of Public Health, Uganda. She has a passion and vast experience in health systems strengthening and evidence based policy making through strengthening of implementation research and production of evidence products, including policy briefs, newspaper articles and position papers.

Email: [skiwanuka@musph.ac.ug](mailto:skiwanuka@musph.ac.ug)

*Jana Körner* is Global Innovation Manager for the CGIAR Research Program, Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS). She is also part of the GIZ-seconded, cross-CGIAR Task Force on Scaling. Email: [J.Korner@cgiar.org](mailto:J.Korner@cgiar.org)

*Anastasia Seferiadis* is post-doc researcher at the Institute of Research for Development (IRD), France, focusing on action research related to gender and inequality, including alternative business models for development. Email: [anastasia.seferiadis@gmail.com](mailto:anastasia.seferiadis@gmail.com)



*Simone Staiger* works at the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), a CGIAR institute. She leads Communications, Monitoring-Evaluation-Learning of the Programme SERVIR-Amazonia, undertaking research in communication and media. She is a long-term member of the journal's editorial board and has previously been a Guest Editor on numerous issues. Email: [s.staiger@cgiar.org](mailto:s.staiger@cgiar.org)

## References

- Beaman, L., & Dillon, A. (2018). Diffusion of agricultural information within social networks: Evidence on gender inequalities from Mali. *Journal of Development Economics*, 133, 147-161.
- Carrillo, F. J., Mohamed, M., Stankosky, M., & Mohamed, M. (2009). An empirical assessment of knowledge management criticality for sustainable development. *Journal of Knowledge Management* 13(5): 71-286
- Caiado, R. G. G., Leal Filho, W., Quelhas, O. L. G., de Mattos Nascimento, D. L., & Ávila, L.V. (2018). A literature-based review on potentials and constraints in the implementation of the sustainable development goals. *Journal of cleaner production*, 198, 1276-1288.
- CGIAR (2020) Sustainable Finance for Peace. <https://www.cgiar.org/news-events/news/sustainable-finance-for-peace/> (Accessed 5 January 2021).
- Cummings, S., Regeer, B. J., Ho, W. & Zweekhorst, M. B. (2013). Proposing a fifth generation of knowledge management for development: investigating convergence between knowledge management for development and transdisciplinary research. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, 9(2), 10-36.
- Cummings, S., Kiwanuka, S., Gillman, H., & Regeer, B. (2019a). The future of knowledge brokering: perspectives from a generational framework of knowledge management for international development. *Information Development*, 35(5), 781-794.
- Cummings, S., Seferiadis, A. A., Maas, J., Bunders, J. F. G., & Zweekhorst, M. B. M. (2019b). Knowledge, social capital, and grassroots development: insights from rural bangladesh. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 55(2), 161–176.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2017.1417584>
- Cummings, S., Kiwanuka, S., & Regeer, B. (2020). The private sector in knowledge brokering for international development: what the experts say. *Information Development*, Online first. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266666920977597>
- Dentoni, D., Waddell, S., & Waddock, S. (2017). Pathways of transformation in global food and agricultural systems: implications from a large systems change theory perspective. *Current opinion in environmental sustainability*, 29, 8-13.
- Dentoni, D., Bitzer, V., & Schouten, G. (2018). Harnessing wicked problems in multi-stakeholder partnerships. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 150(2), 333-356.
- van Ewijk, E., & Ros-Tonen, M.A. (2021). The fruits of knowledge co-creation in agriculture and food-related multi-stakeholder platforms in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic literature review. *Agricultural Systems*, 186. In press.

- Glegg, S. M. and A. Hoens (2016) 'Role domains of knowledge brokering: a model for the health care setting', *Journal of Neurologic Physical Therapy* 40(2), 115–123. DOI: 10.1097/NPT.000000000000122.
- Iza, C.L.B., Dentoni, D., & Omta, S.W.F. (2020). The influence of multi-stakeholder platforms on farmers' innovation and rural development in emerging economies: a systematic literature review. *Journal of Agribusiness in Developing and Emerging Economies* 10 (1), 13-39
- Kiwanuka, S., S. Cummings and B.J. Regeer (2020). The private sector as the 'unusual suspect' in knowledge brokering for international development: a critical review. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal* 15(2): 65-92
- Klerkx, L., & Begemann, S. (2020). Supporting food systems transformation: The what, why, who, where and how of mission-oriented agricultural innovation systems. *Agricultural Systems*, 184, 102901.
- McEwan, C., Mawdsley, E., Banks, G., & Scheyvens, R. (2017). Enrolling the private sector in community development: magic bullet or sleight of hand? *Development and Change*, 48(1), 28–28. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dech.12283>
- Qureshi, I., Sutter, C., & Bhatt, B. (2018) The transformative power of knowledge sharing in settings of poverty and social inequality. *Organization Studies*, 39(11), 1575-1599
- Sartas, M., Schut, M., Hermans, F., Asten, P. V., & Leeuwis, C. (2018). Effects of multi-stakeholder platforms on multi-stakeholder innovation networks: Implications for research for development interventions targeting innovations at scale. *PloS one*, 13(6).
- Schut, M., Leeuwis, C., & Thiele, G. (2020). Science of Scaling: Understanding and guiding the scaling of innovation for societal outcomes. *Agricultural Systems*, 184. In press.
- Scheyvens, R., Banks, G., & Hughes, E. (2016). The private sector and the SDGs: The need to move beyond 'business as usual'. *Sustainable Development*, 24(6), 371-382.
- Spangenberg, J. H. (2013) Pick Simply the Best: Sustainable Development is About Radical Analysis and Selective Synthesis, not About Old Wine in New Bottles. *Sustainable Development* 21: 101-111.
- UN (2015) Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development, United Nations General Assembly. Available at: [https://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E](https://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E)
- UN Joint Inspection Unit (2017) The United Nations system – Private sector partnership arrangements in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Geneva. [https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu\\_rep\\_2017\\_8\\_english\\_1.pdf](https://www.unjiu.org/sites/www.unjiu.org/files/jiu_rep_2017_8_english_1.pdf) (Accessed 5 January 2021).
- USAID (2020) Private sector engagement. <https://www.usaid.gov/work-usaid/private-sector-engagement> (Accessed 5 January 2021)

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.cgiar.org/research/research-centers/>