

Documentation on the Innovation Platform (IP) Method



August 2024

Introductory Note

This fact sheet has been produced as part of a study to map innovative methods and tools in agricultural advisory services in West and Central Africa. This study was commissioned by CORAF/WECARD (the West and Central African Council for Agricultural Research and Development) and carried out by RESCAR-AOC (the West and Central Network for Agricultural and Rural Advisory Services) across 13 West and Central African countries.

The overall objective of the study was to compile a descriptive directory of innovative agricultural advisory methods and tools for scaling up agricultural technologies and innovations in West and Central Africa.

Several individuals within CORAF, RESCAR-AOC, and beyond, across the 13 countries covered by the study, contributed to the success of this initiative. We extend our gratitude to everyone involved for their contribution

1. Overview of the Innovation Platform Method

An agricultural innovation platform (IP) can be defined as **a network that brings together stakeholders either in person, virtually, or through a hybrid format (both in-person and virtual) to generate technical or organisational innovations** through the facilitation of **collaborations** and **partnerships**. Innovation platforms serve as a method for gathering other rural actors and diverse stakeholders such as farmers, traders, agro-industrialists, service providers, researchers, and government representatives, to identify solutions to common challenges, implement activities towards shared goals, and negotiate and coordinate their efforts. This method is commonly used by agricultural research organisations, development agencies, NGOs, and both local and national governments.

Innovation platforms may be temporary or permanent and can be established at different levels—local, national, or sectoral, such as within a specific value chain or economic sector (Posthumus et Wongtschowski, 2014). They can focus on a single thematic area, such as a specific commodity, or address broader topics, including natural resource management, decision-making processes strengthening, awareness-raising, and targeted interventions.

Successful innovation platforms require skilled, neutral facilitation, either by personnel from the initiating organisation or an external facilitator. The facilitator's role includes

managing communication, conflict resolution, enhancing group dynamics, documenting activities, building capacity, and advocating for institutional change.

2. Brief description of Beneficiaries Supported by the Innovation Platform Method

The innovation platform method primarily supports medium-sized farms, typically ranging from an average of 2 to 3 hectares per household. Beneficiaries include men, women, and young people. These farms generally operate mixed production systems, integrating various plant and animal species. Livestock production includes poultry, small ruminants, cattle, and working animals or pets such as horses and donkeys. The main crops grown and marketed include millet, sorghum, maize, rice, groundnuts, cowpeas, cotton, sesame, cassava, mangoes, and tomatoes, and more. Agricultural products are sold in local markets, nearby towns, capital cities, and in cross-border markets.

3. Necessity and Objectives of the Innovation Platform Method

Innovation platforms were introduced in response to the limited dissemination of research-generated technologies and the weak participation of direct beneficiaries in identifying and implementing development projects. The objectives of establishing innovation platforms include: (i) facilitating networking among actors in agricultural value chains; (ii) improving access to information for stakeholders, (iii) enhancing the dissemination of technologies and innovations among IP members and (iv) strengthening agricultural product marketing.

The IPs have been set up to serve as a framework for co-creation and sharing of knowledge and experience among its members in order to: (i) identify the challenges and opportunities in the production and processing of agroforestry products, (ii) focus research questions on production systems, (iii) assess the social and economic impacts of production systems, (iv) identify the levers for adopting technologies and innovations to improve agricultural yields and producers' incomes, (v) support innovation and the dissemination of technologies.

4. Implementation Methodology of the Innovation Platform Method

The implementation of the innovation platform method follows several key steps: (i) informing and raising awareness among communities about IPs and member profiles, (ii) community-driven selection of IP members, (iii) holding a general assembly to officially

launch the IP, (iv) electing the executive members of the IP, (v) developing an action plan for each IP, (vi) regularly organising IP meetings and sessions.

5. Impact of the Innovation Platform Method

Innovation platforms will not have an immediate and direct impact, as their contribution helps people to talk to each other and act together to put new ideas and solutions into practice (Posthumus and Wongtschowski, 2014). As a result, they have a positive effect on improving the crop and livestock production of the beneficiary farmers (Barro, 2013; Teno and Cadhilon, 2016). This capacity building has a positive impact on agricultural yields and members' incomes. According to Barro (2013) and Millogo (2013), the innovation platforms have had a positive impact on the agronomic performance of member farmers in the Sissili region in Burkina Faso. Agricultural yields have increased by almost 90% (Barro, 2013). As yield increases are closely linked to income, Barro (2013) found that strengthening the capacity of producers through the innovation platforms led to an increase in net income per hectare of around 102% and an improvement in net income per worker of around 225%.

During the case study documentation interviews, farmers and organisations promoting IPs came back to certain impacts of IPs, including:

- greater synergy between farmers, researchers and agricultural advisory services;
- taking into account the real needs of producers, so focusing research and extension activities on knowledge and innovations that are of interest to farmers;
- better use of local knowledge through the sharing of this knowledge among farmers and between farmers and technicians, and above all the planning of experiments at research level to assess the effectiveness and optimal conditions for the application of certain endogenous knowledge;
- better appropriation and adoption of technologies;
- increased agricultural production through the adoption of new technologies and farming practices;
- improving farmers' incomes through better organisation of value chains and better marketing;
- improving food security through more sustainable and diversified production systems;

- community resilience to the impacts of climate change through the adoption of resilient technologies.

For example, in the case of Chad, the adoption rate of new technologies with IPs varies between 60% and 90%, reflecting the growing acceptance of agricultural innovations among farmers. This adoption is facilitated by practical demonstrations, technical advice and direct support for farmers in implementing good farming practices. The increase in yields through IP varies between 50% and 70%, which can be ascribed to the adoption of modern techniques, such as improved cultivation practices and the introduction of more efficient production technologies. This translates into a direct improvement in production and income for farmers.

6. Technologies and Innovations Promoted through the Innovation Platform Method

Several technologies and innovations have been promoted through the innovation platform approach, including:

- The use of improved seed varieties.
- The establishment of nurseries and mango tree grafting techniques.
- Agricultural product processing technologies.
- Access to new markets.
- Collective procurement of agricultural inputs.
- Soil mulching using woody biomass.
- Livestock feeding strategies incorporating fodder trees.
- The management of trees and shrubs in farmland.
- The use of improved seed varieties
- Men advocating for women's land rights.
- Facilitating women's access to microfinance credit, etc.

7. Average Implementation Costs of the Innovation Platform Method

Implementing innovation platforms often requires substantial financial investment (Gning *et al.*, 2021). Costs vary depending on the activities involved but typically amount to around USD 1,000 per annum (Posthumus *et Wongtschowski*, 2014). These expenses

cover facilitator training fees and salaries, venue rental, transport, food and beverage, communication costs, and, if necessary, funding to test new ideas (David et Cofini, 2019).

Travel and subsistence costs for IP members depend on whether they are self-funded or supported by external partners. Self-financed members contribute between 1,500 and 2,500 CFA francs per meeting, while externally funded participants receive support ranging from 8,000 to 10,000 CFA francs per meeting, with an average of 2 to 4 meetings each year.

8. Strengths and Limitations of the Innovation Platform Method

According to Ouidoh (2018), the existence of markets and the proximity of stakeholders facilitate the implementation of IPs. The diversity of stakeholders and the involvement of community leaders promote the identification and resolution of the challenges facing farmers. However, the low diversity of stakeholders in the IPs, the absence of a facilitator and the low capacity of members to provide solutions to the problems identified have limited their operation.

9. Prerequisites for success and the role of various players in the success of the Innovation Platform method

The successful results of the IPs are related to:

- First and foremost, the commitment of the Innovation Platform's umbrella organisation was crucial. A well-structured, dynamic union with a diversified partnership and endogenous facilitators to act as relays for supervising women producers;
- Conflicts are resolved endogenously. This is particularly the case for the harmonisation of selling prices for specific crops;
- The organisation of joint collections and grouped transport of produce to warehouse sites and fair and market sites, which solves transport-related issues.

Deploying the innovation platform (IP) method requires qualified human resources and specific skills. Sustainable development of the IPs is envisioned through: (i) their composition (direct and indirect members who are present at all times in the communities), (ii) their management, which is carried out by the direct players themselves, (iii) capacity building for the members to ensure their independent operation before the end of the project, (iv) the introduction of a membership fee to set up an

operating fund for the IP before the end of the project, (v) the search for other partnerships and funding by the members.

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