

Farmer Access to Innovation Resources

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It is not rare for small-scale farmers in the South to develop their own agricultural innovations. Less common are deliberate R&D efforts to support these innovation processes. DURAS has supported a pilot programme that challenged this by testing Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs) in Cambodia, Ethiopia, South Africa and Uganda¹. By using locally managed funds, farmers finance their own research and learning activities. This microcredit system builds small farmers' autonomy and catalyses multi-partner experimentation guided by the farmers' ideas.

It is now recognised that agricultural development and natural resource management (NRM) do not unfold in a linear fashion, with new knowledge always being produced by research and passing through outreach services and systems before finally reaching farmers. Rural people are not merely the beneficiaries of this new knowledge: they may also create it or facilitate its creation.

That recognition led to new approaches to agricultural research for development (ARD), designed to improve innovation and local learning systems through a multi-stakeholder approach.

Stimulate and support local innovation

If small-scale farmers are to play a central role in the ARD approach, it is essential that changes take place in the way research funds are allocated. Funding smallholders directly allows them to decide what kind of "external" support they need from researchers or extensionists, and puts them in the driving seat of ARD. The project "**Farmer Access to Innovation Resources: Action Research on Innovation Support Funds**" (FAIR) is based on the recognition of farmer's unique potential to direct relevant research and to innovate.

This action-research programme has focused on Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs), whereby local stakeholders receive funding in four countries of the South where this was piloted: Cambodia, Ethiopia, South Africa and Uganda². The questions at the heart of the project were the following: would alternative funding mechanisms managed by farmers

contribute to a paradigm shift in the way in which research is formulated and managed? Could it be done in such a way as to be cost-effective and sustainable in the long term?

The programme was implemented under the umbrella of PROLINNOVA, an international multi-stakeholder partnership programme initiated by NGOs and intended to build a worldwide learning network to promote local innovation in ecological agriculture and NRM. It involved communities and individual farmers, grassroots community organisations (GCOs), NGOs, researchers and extensionists.

LISF proposal selection

The LISFs' modus operandi and governance systems changed considerably from country to country. In some countries, most of the selection process and fund management was done by GCOs. In others, lead NGOs and other development agencies had a stronger role to play.

In all countries, nevertheless, committees were set up to select proposals, and in all of these farmers participated actively in decision-making.

1. In 2007, upon ending the DURAS-supported phase, the programme partners mobilised support from the Rockefeller Foundation. With this, it has been able to work in the following additional countries: Ghana, Kenya, Nepal and Tanzania.

2. The Programme also worked in Nepal, but funded through sources other than DURAS.



▲ Conscious efforts were made to increase the number of women in decision-making structures that approve applications and in supporting women's initiatives in R&D.

The main prerequisites for an application to the LISF generally shared the following criteria:

- The proposed activity must be (i) a personal idea, (ii) technologically, economically, environmentally and socially sound, and (iii) reproducible among the poorest in society;
- There should be reasonable prospects of value addition through LISF support;
- There should be some equity contribution from the farmer or farmer group initiating the experiment, whether in cash or kind;
- The candidate(s) must be prepared to: (i) work under an approved plan, (ii) track the activity, document it and report on it, and (iii) share the results with others, e.g. receiving visitors and imparting his or her new knowledge to them.

Of the 274 applications submitted in the four countries between 2005 and 2007, 160 (58%) were awarded funding. Farmers used the funds in a range of activities related to crop and animal husbandry. Most funds went to experiments by farmers (or farmer groups) on a wide variety of innovative practices, while some funding was granted to enable

farmers within the pilot countries to visit each other. Over time, more conscious efforts were made to increase the number of women in decision-making structures that approve applications and in supporting women's initiatives in R&D. As a result, women's participation has improved and the total percentage of applications done by individual women has reached almost 30% of the total applications.

Initially, there was a tendency for farmers to see LISF funds as a means to purchase normal inputs for production. The aid legacy runs deep, and the experience of FAIR has been that it is necessary for the supporting NGOs and government agencies to work closely with farmers to ensure a clear understanding of the purpose of the funds. Even so, many farmers still wanted to do much of the experimentation on their own.

The supporting partners encouraged a more collaborative approach between farmers and other actors (e.g. formal researchers) in jointly formulating proposals for joint experimentation. It should be noted that the more LISF management

was decentralised to the farmer/CBO level, the more relevant the proposals were for the local farmers. Sometimes, the supporting partners had to make great efforts to help farmers transform their ideas into research proposals that met the selection criteria. It has been the experience in FAIR that lack of formal training in experimental design and limited abilities to express ideas in writing and to estimate costs are factors that make it difficult for farmers to prepare acceptable proposals on their own. They often need access to local technical support for sound proposal formulation and documentation.

Farmers central to LISF implementation and management

NGOs presented LISF information to farmers and rural communities as an integral part of their activities and services in those communities. In some pilot countries, a mass media approach was taken. Methods included local radio broadcasts and farmer fairs. ...

Two application models were developed:

■ **The more centralised model, involving a multi-stakeholder approach.** The application is sent to a facilitating organisation and presented to a selection committee, which sets criteria and approves or rejects applications. Exchanges between farmers and partners are facilitated under this model. However, it is only really governed by farmers to a limited extent and its transaction costs are higher.

■ **The totally decentralised model is directly managed by local farmers.** Applications are selected by GCOs, while the facilitating organisation plays only a supporting role. That model gives local smallholders easier access, and has a more moderate transaction cost. However, the quality of selected proposals is a problem. There is a danger that the LISFs will only fund what farmers spontaneously suggest, and it is more difficult to secure involvement of formal researchers in the approved proposals.

Sustainable management of a decentralised funding system

The FAIR project was created in order to develop a sustainable system, co-managed by farmers, that would give them access to resources for farmer-led innovation. After the initial duration of the pilots, much progress was made in decentralising money management to groups of farmers or GCOs, though challenges

were still arising. One of the key challenges faced is monitoring. The more decentralised, the harder it is to ensure good reporting of both the process and the result of the experiment funded.

The innovations made possible by these micro-grants benefit not only farmers and their local communities; they may also be of real scientific interest. A better understanding of the impacts of these experiments will emerge from tracking their effects over a longer timeframe. Are the practices associated with these experiments retained, improved upon or refined over time, or do farmers revert to former practices? Have new practices led to reduced risk or improved production, and have they ultimately contributed to more sustainable livelihoods for that farmer and perhaps the wider community?

Does the involvement of farmers in planning and implementing their own research, and in evaluating the proposals of other farmers, equip them better to interact with other stakeholders in ARD, i.e. does this experience strengthen farmers' voices in decision-making about ARD? These are challenging questions that are being looked at more closely as the pilot initiative reaches a more mature stage.

If the experiments show promise both in social and economic terms, other aspects must be looked at more closely at a later stage of the project. LISF fund replenishment options

need to be developed to enable them to be sustained. In some countries, the award is treated as a loan.

This has been partially effective. Loan portions have been retained within farmer groups and have tended thereafter to be used as part of their loan capital to support normal production activity. Moreover, the question has been raised: if formal researchers are not expected to repay loans for conducting research, why should farmer researchers be expected to do this? Should not some small part of funds available for ARD in the country be allocated to farmer-led research?

Finally, LISFs have served to focus the attention of ARD stakeholders on developing more useful models for financing research relevant for smallholders. The innovation system and the role of the farmer within that system are put in the foreground. This bodes well for better and more effective practice. ■

Partnership

Lead organisation: Farmer Support Group (South Africa)

Partners: Centre d'Étude et de Développement Agricola Cambodgien (CEDAC) Cambodia, ETC Foundation (the Netherlands), Agri-Service Ethiopia (ASE) Ethiopia, Farmer Support Group (FSG) South Africa, Environmental Alert Uganda.

Countries involved: Cambodia, Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa

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