

Capacity building for effective innovation practice in agricultural research organisations.

Considerations for program design.



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THE WHY AND WHAT OF INNOVATION

The current interest in agricultural innovation stems from the recognition that the social and economic value of research, education, infrastructure and other public investments only takes place when ideas, skills and resources are put into productive use. This process of “putting into use” is the process of innovation. Research turns money into ideas. Innovation turns ideas into money. Agricultural research plays a special role in the innovation process as both a source of new ideas (component technologies), but also a critically important problem solving capability that helps fine tune technologies and ideas in the process of their application in farm production and business. International good practice on research and innovation suggests that agricultural research is most effective when it is closely coupled to the players and processes with the responsibility and incentives to make innovation happen.

Critical to this thinking is the recognition that innovation is often a multi-scale phenomena involving an integrated set of changes spanning farm practice, market behaviour and policy settings. Many of the challenges in making effective use of research in the process of innovation, is that research practice is shaped by the historic belief that the creation of new ideas is the most critical step. In actual fact, what is now realized is that the key step often concerns the changes farmers and entrepreneurs make in their production and business systems to take advantage of these new ideas. This is sometimes referred to as

systems innovation. Policy changes are also important in creating conditions to use ideas. The separation of these two task, creating ideas and putting them into use, means that the overall process of innovation works less effectively. Public investments in innovation have been skewed towards the creation of ideas through research rather than a more balanced approach that supports both parts of the innovation process. Attempts to address this problem by public investment in agricultural extension services has only been partially successful, because the focus is on delivery of new ideas, rather than creating the conditions for the use of these ideas.

THE INNOVATION CAPACITY BUILDING CHALLENGE.

This raises capacity building challenges for agricultural research organisations in their search for more effective ways of supporting innovation and the social and economic impact that arises from this. Central to this is the challenge of how to make research a more responsive player in the wider innovation landscape of farmers, entrepreneurs and policy makers.

There is no simple answer to how this can be best achieved because:

- Different innovation challenges and opportunities require different configurations of research and other stakeholders.



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- The nature of these innovation challenges and opportunities is often emergent and unpredictable and therefore difficult to design stakeholder engagement processes definitively in advance. Instead experimentation and iteration between practice and design are required. This is known as contextual design.
- The agency of individuals (often as champions) can be key in driving innovation processes, but it is difficult to seed or identify such champions, or they may be absent.
- New research practice aimed at promoting innovation, needs leadership endorsement and support at organizational level. This often entails policy change in research organizations and associated ministries in order to legitimize new practices and approaches. It is also an issue of developing routine practices and learnt behaviours that help research organisations more effectively interface with other players in the wider innovation environment, and
- There is a very strong national dimension to the way innovation processes take place, often with very deep cultural, political and historical origins. Interventions (including research) need to be able to work with and support and strengthen these national styles of innovation rather than trying to replace them with models transferred from elsewhere.

Therefore, the implications for a capacity building agenda of a research organization often include:

- Going through a “reset” process where they reflect on how change and innovation really happens in their country or sector. This often needs to be done with wider stakeholder groups and can form the basis of new strategic or operational plans. It can be a painful process as researchers often need to confront their own deeply held perceptions about the nature of change and innovation and their role in it
- Building up a range of soft skills amongst scientists that can help them engage more effectively in different modes of partnership and collaboration with non-research organizations
- Effective practice is contingent on context so notions of best practice are less useful, because. Principles are more useful, but need mentoring and coaching on how to translate these principles into contextually relevant practice.
- Tools and approaches imported from global practice need considerable contextualization, adaptation and evaluation before these can be used effectively in a particular national setting.

- Capacity building needs to take place at multiple levels: individual, organizational and policy levels.
- Since innovation challenges and contexts are continuously evolving, capacity building needs to be an institutionalized process of continuous learning and improvement

CONTOURS OF AN INNOVATION CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAM.

What might a capacity building program look like? The objective (purpose or behavioural change in log frame speak) of such a program might be ***“Practices and processes that enable the role of research in innovation institutionalized in research and partner or client organizations”***.

The program might include the following set of integrated elements.

1. Resetting the narrative of how change and innovation happens. A series of facilitated workshops including senior research managers that unpicks the nature of the innovation process and uses this to develop a strategic plan (real or otherwise). Supported by expert sessions on global experiences of enabling agricultural innovation.
2. Building essential skills. A series of workshops on that may include; skills for partnering and engagement, project logic and theory of change; monitoring evaluation and learning tools for adaptive managed/ action learning, the theory and practice of multi-stakeholder processes, innovation platforms etc.
3. Undertaking a cluster of experimental innovation projects supported by innovation mentors / coaches, who help identify innovation and market opportunities and partners (particularly in the private sector), broker partnerships, support adaptive management and learning by doing. These projects can then be used as the focus for reflective learning and understanding the nature of effective innovation process in a particular national setting.
4. Establishing, supporting and institutionalising a process of reflective learning. This might involve developing a tradition of creating practice notes or writeshops / video shop for collecting and sharing experience.
5. Establishing and facilitating a policy and institutional change reference group / dialogue process to broker lessons from the experiences emerging from 3# and 4#.

RINSE, REPEAT.

The most common misconception is that this sort of capacity building is a one off effort and that once done innovation capacity is built. In actual fact a true measure of success of such program is when reflecting on practice, learning and engagement with the policy enabling

environment becomes a routine activity. If these steps are done routinely, organisations can continuously update their capacity and effectively contribute to the ever evolving innovation challenges and opportunities that emerge in today's unpredictable world.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

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