

Self-Organizing Networks in Policy and Planning: Experience from Sierra Leone's Partnership for Agricultural Innovation and Development

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SYNOPSIS OF PROJECT DATA

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| Project name: | Sierra Leone Partnership for Agricultural Innovation and Development (SL-PAID) |
| Established: | July 2008 by Memorandum of Association, in a process facilitated by the DFID-financed Research Into Use Programme |
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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For Sierra Leone, the period of rapid change following the disastrous 1991–2002 war has provided opportunities to rebuild and reinvent institutional frameworks supporting agriculture. The country's new vision for agriculture requires the sector to shift toward a pluralistic and competitive rural service economy, with agribusiness acting as an engine of socioeconomic growth and development. For that vision to become a reality, a stream of new policy, process, and technological innovations must be created. Although inside or outside of Sierra Leone there is no shortage of knowledge relevant to Sierra Leone's current needs, this knowledge is not yet used on any scale for innovation, because the conditions to use it are lacking.

In a well-functioning AIS, knowledge flows between all the principle domains, underpinning myriad investment decisions and behavior changes that collectively drive productivity and growth. In Sierra Leone, as in many low-income development contexts, these flows and interactions around problems and opportunities are weak and have historically taken place within a limited institutional context.

Many research agencies in sub-Saharan Africa have evolved little over recent decades, are institutionally hide-bound, and have little accountability to other elements of the innovation system. Priority-setting mechanisms that shape investments in the AIS still tend to be formal, generally top-down exercises. They lack the sort of broad-based, "many-to-many" problem-solving exchanges that are essential drivers of innovation.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES AND DESCRIPTION

Within the Research Into Use Programme (IAP 7), a country strategy team worked with local stakeholders in Sierra Leone to develop an innovative strategy for an autonomous, self-organizing group to develop as a platform for improving policy and practice related to agricultural innovation (Joffe et al. 2008). This open, inclusive network would be a medium for creating new productive alliances and creating value.

As a first step, the team worked through a local secretariat to bring key actors together in a series of workshops, ensuring participation across the innovation system. Participants included farmers, farmer-based organizations, and representatives of rural communities; agribusiness and market actors (processors, wholesalers, retailers, input companies, equipment suppliers, and financial service providers); knowledge intermediaries, including technical advisory and business development services; communications services and the media; knowledge generators (research, education, and other widely used sources); and policy makers, decision makers, and regulators with influence over "framework conditions."

The participants used innovation system mapping techniques to visualize the main elements and actors in the AIS and the strength of the linkages and knowledge flows between them. More specifically, they assessed and mapped knowledge flows between elements of the system and the factors influencing these flows in relation to rural and non-rural livelihoods and routes out of poverty. They also identified key drivers of change in the context for agricultural policies and programs and determined where investments and other economic activities were likely to create new challenges and demands for knowledge. This process required participants to develop an initial map of the key institutional elements and organizations relating to the AIS, which was transposed into a more formalized innovation system domain structure. Next, the participants worked in groups to map linkages between those domains. The subsequent analysis and discussion highlighted a number of findings:

- ***Weak or ineffective knowledge flows from markets*** into the small-farm sector resulted in asymmetries that led to exploitive behavior.
- ***Very unidirectional and supply-driven knowledge flows from intermediaries and from policy processes*** into the small-farm sector led to coordination problems and high transaction costs (see the next point).
- ***Formal policy processes were poorly linked with other key innovation system elements.*** Weaknesses at the center and coordination problems limited the public sector's effectiveness.
- ***Weak links between financial institutions and other elements of the AIS*** meant that formal lenders lacked information to support credit flows to rural entrepreneurs.
- ***The research system had poor links with all other actors in the AIS.*** It did not deliver knowledge oriented towards value addition in the market chain, and a lack of trust persisted between researchers and actors in the production and agribusiness "side" of the sector.

As a result of the workshops and related meetings, a core group of actors decided to organize and form a partnership. Through flexible alliances, members would engage in innovative activities and build a better business environment to foster and scale out those activities. The Partnership for Agricultural Innovation and Development (PAID), established in Freetown in 2008, now operates autonomously as a "partnership of service-providers," open to all who subscribe to its vision and mission.

Under a Memorandum of Association, PAID has a general assembly of all members, a board (elected by the

members and mandated to manage the affairs of the partnership), and a secretariat (responsible for day-to-day operations, coordination, and administration). In summary, the association's defining features are that it is self-governing, membership-based and has a broad, representative membership; it is financed through subscriptions; it receives broad support from the Government of Sierra Leone and principal agencies; and it is embedded in key policy forums.

BENEFITS, IMPACT, AND EXPERIENCE TO DATE

PAID is a young organization but already operates successfully in a number of key respects. PAID members have formulated and voted on appropriate governance structures, rules, norms, and the interaction mechanisms required for PAID to operate effectively as a vehicle for delivering innovations in the agricultural sector. Under rules established by the membership, "formal" interaction in PAID is collective and consensual. Strategic decisions are made or endorsed by the general membership at the annual general meeting. Operational decisions are taken at the district level and at events held at the platform level.

The organization has also launched two fast-track, commodity-based innovation platforms. These initial platforms were selected based on information from field assessments by or with the participation of PAID member organizations:

- ***Solar drying in fruit and other horticultural value chains.*** Twenty solar drying units operate in communities in four districts in the Northern Province; early reports indicate that they are used successfully.
- ***Poultry feed production and marketing.*** Maize is being grown on 110 acres (46 hectares) across locations in Bo, Kenema, and Kailahun Districts for a seed multiplication drive and eventual use for feed in intensive poultry production systems.

The platforms have spun off active partnerships with other actors who want to adopt platform technology, including CARE International, MADAM-Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone Centre for Agribusiness Development, and the Nehemiah Project. To guide future priorities for developing platforms, PAID has documented a more structured approach consisting of open calls for proposals, concept screening, investment events, and small grants for opportunity development.

Membership in PAID makes it easier for people and organizations to obtain information to guide choices, gain support for their decisions, and build alliances. Typically, information

flows informally among the wide range of stakeholders present at key events and meetings, including stakeholders from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Forestry, other central and district government agencies, FAO, DFID, the Sierra Leone Agricultural Research Institute, banks, farmer organizations, civil society and nongovernmental organizations, producers, processors, traders, and transporters.

PAID also has a place on the Agriculture Advisory Group and Technical Committee, a formal, policy-making standing committee that was involved in developing Sierra Leone's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme compact and National Sustainable Agricultural Development Plan, linked to the national poverty reduction strategy. PAID has also brought together actors in extension to form the Sierra Leone Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services. Stakeholders in this process identified gaps in extension services; as a result, a policy on extension in Sierra Leone is being developed. Finally, PAID members in Bo District raised concern over the activity of a fraudulent actor in their region. This concern was channeled to the secretariat and brought to the notice of ministry officials. The situation was corrected.

INNOVATIVE ELEMENT: SOCIAL BUSINESS NETWORKS FOR INNOVATION SYSTEMS

From a public policy perspective, the means to foster innovation often focus on improving linkages and flows of information between actors and interests. For this reason, governments offer incentives for innovative businesses to locate in clusters (see TN 4 in module 5), where their close association can generate a variety of spillover benefits and externalities. Governments also subsidize interactions by organizing events and meetings around key policy areas in which the state wishes to drive innovation that the market alone may not deliver.

These strategies are valid but require complementary approaches to enable the “conversation” that will support policy and practice. The new frontier for agencies wishing to support the AIS—rather than supporting priority-setting processes alone—is to foster self-organizing social business networks (see TN 2 in module 1). Such networks respond to the interests of a diverse group of stakeholders and can operate flexibly and dynamically in light of demands and opportunities identified by their membership.

This general model is well established as a way to organize innovation in industry, where social business design approaches, increasingly underpinned by new social media tools and engagement strategies, are used to harness

collective intelligence around investment decisions. Within the social business paradigm, boundaries between public, private, and third sector roles begin to break down for practical purposes. Similarly, boundaries between policy and practice and between planning and delivery are no longer necessarily institutionally or organizationally distinct; these activities are undertaken instead by individuals and groups applying creative and flexible solutions to common problems across organizational boundaries, representing particular interests and competencies in pursuit of value-creating opportunities. These approaches are already driving transformational change in more advanced economies and may be equally transformational in developing country contexts.

LESSONS AND ISSUES FOR WIDER APPLICATION

Within the PAID network, a number of early decisions were highly influential in *building social capital and reducing transaction costs*.

Network membership and the role of facilitation

Members decided that the partnership would be autonomous and establish its own secretariat, membership would be open to those who subscribed to the partnership's vision, and organizations would be represented by senior representatives with decision-making power. Membership also would be open to service providers of various kinds, in agriculture and agribusiness. An elected executive would represent the partnership between general meetings, a general code of conduct would be drafted and agreed, and the network would be financially independent and sustainable. In addition to charging registration and annual subscription fees, the network would raise financing independently and develop revenues from innovative activities. Revenue would not only sustain the partnership but serve as an incentive for membership.

The network was able to come to these decisions because of the *initial investment by key actors in facilitating a core understanding and common vision of the network's role*. Members' early involvement in decisions on structure and governance increased confidence and promoted engagement. Higher levels of trust and reduced transaction costs have enabled PAID to rely more on signals through the internal “knowledge market” and less on formal priority-setting mechanisms.

Existing sector frameworks are still needed

Networks for innovation are not a replacement for or an alternative to existing sector-wide and/or vertical subsector frameworks. Such frameworks are still needed to provide the formal process and democratic accountability around policy and practice. Networks like PAID bridge such frameworks, providing an opportunity for more flexible and less formal interaction within a different institutional paradigm.

For networks like PAID, *engagement with government is important but should be balanced to avoid prejudicing the network's independence and openness in decision making.* Attaining such a balance can be tricky. For example, Rwanda's National Innovation Coalition is restricted to a few public sector bodies. Plans to establish another separate and more open agricultural innovation network attracted no high-level support and were never implemented. In Bolivia, the Natural Resources Information and Knowledge Network (SICTAF, Sistema de Información y Conocimiento Tecnológico Agropecuario y Forestal) explored establishing itself as a self-governing, socially inclusive knowledge network. The responsible ministry was unable to engage productively with such a network other than as its apex institution, however; it never accepted that the network could operate within a self-defined governance framework. This lack of formal support was a key reason why the initiative foundered.

One lesson from this diverse experience is that *the open, "flat," nonhierarchical structure that favors innovation is not always consistent with established ways of doing government business.* Indeed, where coalitions are facilitated to promote AIS they can end up reinforcing existing networks rather than bringing in new voices and influences on policy.

Financial sustainability

As always, financial sustainability remains a major consideration. The facilitation, coordination, and "market research" underpinning the creation of PAID in Sierra Leone were financed by DFID, along with the core administration and personnel costs. *This initial subsidy is very likely to be a generic requirement for such networks, but it should be*

provided only in the context of a strategy and path towards financial independence. As noted, PAID's member organizations pay a registration fee and annual subscription (approximately US\$30 and US\$150, respectively) to support core network costs.

Improving linkages and working relationships between research and the business sector

Many networks dissolve because members perceive little real value in participating. A key lesson from Sierra Leone and elsewhere is to *provide pathways to see initiatives through and gain the rewards of participation, both professional and financial.* In practical terms, this means that the network should offer a framework for adaptive research, enterprise development, and scaling out innovations. "Pull" mechanisms such as innovation-financing events and competitions and related processes will help to seed ideas and new enterprises out of the network. For one of its members, the Sierra Leone Agricultural Research Institute, PAID acts as a new framework for *improving linkages and working relationships between research and the business sector.* The network also serves as a channel to bring technologies already developed by the institute into use and for the institute to "plug in" to the new priorities emerging from innovation platforms.

PAID's continuing heavy reliance on transmitting information directly through meetings and field operations raises costs and is one area where improvement is needed. *The value of face-to-face interaction will never be replaced, but social networks for AIS can and should develop strategies to apply mobile and web-based social media.* These technologies permit information and knowledge to be exchanged at a low cost, both "internally" and with other stakeholders and influencers locally and globally. PAID is exploring these avenues through the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services, which is piloting the Innodev platform (www.innodev.org) in Sierra Leone and Uganda to support problem solving through networks, enable groups to form around opportunities, and attract support for entrepreneurs through mentors and investment partners.