



Addressing gender dynamics in innovation platforms

Although women play a central role in agriculture and family well-being, they often own few resources and are unable to make decisions over their use. As a result, interventions targeting smallholder farmers frequently fail to address women's needs.

Involving women fully in innovation platforms can help overcome this problem. That means understanding the situation of women (and men) beforehand, ensuring that men and women prioritize issues separately before trying to find joint solutions (and perhaps pursuing separate initiatives if no joint priority can be agreed), ensuring that women's voices are heard, and employing skilled facilitators who are sensitive to women's issues.

If well-designed and facilitated, innovation platforms can be a good way for women to communicate their perspectives to other stakeholders and find solutions to the problems they face. But it is not enough merely to invite women to attend platform meetings.

Women need to voice their views and participate in making decisions in innovation platforms to identify gender-specific challenges and design effective and relevant solutions.

Definitions

An innovation platform is a space for learning and change. It is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests: farmers, traders, food processors, researchers, government officials etc. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities and find ways to achieve their goals. They may design and implement activities as a platform, or coordinate activities by individual members.

Gender is the social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female, and the relationships between men and women (and boys and girls). Sex is determined biologically; gender is determined by society, so may differ among societies and over time.

Platforms can perpetuate power imbalances that women face in their daily lives (Cullen et al. 2013). It can be a challenge for them to participate equally with men and often, women are expected to be quiet, respectful and deferential. These ingrained ideas limit active discussion and debate.

With heavy workloads, women may not have the time to participate in innovation platforms. Their husbands and others may even disapprove of their attending meetings outside the home. This brief presents three ways to overcome these problems.

1 Analyze gender before forming platforms
Before an innovation platform is formed, it is essential to have a good understanding of the gender dynamics within a community. That means understanding the cultural norms that shape women's (and men's) farm work, domestic duties, social status and access to and control over resources.

Many tools are available for researchers and planners to do this analysis (UNDP 2001). These tools help distill critical information from a complex social and cultural situation, and can inform the design of an innovation platform and the approaches used in it. For example, if it is taboo for women to interact with men outside of their families, the innovation platform might find a separate venue for women to interact on their own. If women are busiest from early morning to mid-afternoon, meetings might be scheduled later in the day.

In India, 90% of livestock activities, especially milk production, are done by women. So, innovation platforms there that focus on dairying have to include women and address their constraints. The key questions to answer during gender analysis are in Box 1.

Box 1. Questions to ask in a gender analysis

- What activities do women and men, boys and girls do in this community?
- Where do they carry them out?
- How much of their day is spent doing these activities?
- Who owns or controls the most important production resources?
- Who makes decisions about resource use?
- Do men and women participate differently in community affairs?
- What roles do they have in the wider community?
- What are the norms and beliefs that support the existing roles?

Tools to capture this information include activity profiles, 24-hour activity, access and control profiles, seasonal calendars and social relations frameworks.

Box 2 illustrates how an innovation platform on livestock feed in India addressed women's concerns.

Box 2. Prioritizing women's issues

In Almora and Bageshwar districts in Uttarakhand, people collect grass from the forest to feed their livestock. This accounts for 70% of the animals' diet. Collecting it is strictly a woman's job, it takes her about 3-4 hours per day. When she brings it home, she throws it on the ground for the animals to eat. Perhaps a quarter is spoiled when the animals trample on it.

Development organizations have tried to reduce the wastage by introducing manually operated, wheeled chaff-cutters. But these cutters are heavy and need at least two people to operate. Labour in the area is scarce because many men migrate to the cities, leaving the women behind to manage the farm. The cutters have been left to rust.

In 2013, innovation platform meetings facilitated by MilkIT, a project managed by the International Livestock Research Institute, discussed the lack of markets for milk, fodder scarcity and poor access to credit. Women said that fodder wastage was a priority; they underscored the problems in using the big chaff-cutters. After several discussions, simpler choppers and feed troughs were introduced.

These have saved fodder and cut the time spent cleaning the stalls, considerably reducing the women's labour burden. The feed troughs have roughly halved the fodder wastage, equivalent to 12% more feed. More than 130 farmers have built troughs, and more than 225 have adopted the new choppers.

2 Capture women's voices

If women do not get a chance to speak, their voices may not be heard, and their views ignored. Plus, women may be reluctant to express their views in front of men or people they see as powerful.

Various methods can make sure their perspectives are heard by innovation platform members: small group discussions, games and participatory video (Box 3).

In mixed groups, facilitators need to provide space for women to express their views. If women find it difficult to speak out in front of men, the platform members can be divided into separate groups for men and women (and perhaps by age).

An easy-to-use forage chopper (Photo: Thanammal Ravichandran)



Women representatives on committees should be chosen to represent the interests of women and to engage with the other members.

In the Nile Basin Development Challenge Program in Ethiopia, participatory videos were used to capture the perspectives of women farmers about natural resource management (Box 3).

Box 3. Capturing women's voices through participatory video

The Nile Basin Development Challenge Program established innovation platforms in three sites. Early on, it became clear that the voices of women were not being heard. So facilitators organized parallel exercises with both men and women farmers using tools such as participatory video and role-playing games.

In Fogera district, a 10-day training workshop was organized for six men and six women farmers training them on how to use videos to document issues they thought important. After the training, they used cameras to record the problems and challenges they faced and to propose solutions. The videos were shown to the wider community and then to extension agents, the local government administration, the Bureau of Agriculture, national research institutes and local NGOs.

This approach enabled women (who rarely speak in public) to voice their issues. It led to the platform agreeing to work on soil and water management problems that were important to men and women.

Farmers tell their stories with participatory video (Photo: Beth Cullen)



3Employ good facilitation skills

A good facilitator is vital for the various stakeholders in an innovation platform to participate and share their ideas. He or she must ensure that women are represented and have a strong voice.

That means taking into account cultural settings, power structures and the ways men and women relate. These may limit women's participation, their ability to raise issues and their likelihood to benefit from new ways of doing things. Box 4 shows how facilitators in the MilkIT project enhanced women's participation.

Box 4. Facilitation matters: Setting the venue and breaking taboos in India

Early in the life of the MilkIT project platforms, meetings were held at the district administrative office. But the distance to this venue made it hard for women to attend. Realizing this, the facilitators changed the venue to temples and community halls near the villages. Women's attendance increased, and they became more confident to speak.

Women facilitators made the women farmers more comfortable and boosted their confidence.

Model women farmers were named as "innovation champions" (Klerkx et al. 2010). The champions made frequent visits to platform members, listened to their constraints and offered solutions.

The facilitators asked a local teacher to talk the women into breaking a taboo on selling milk. Their solution was for women to go to the temple with the milk and seek forgiveness before selling it.

Addressing gender issues in innovation platforms

- Before setting up a platform, find out who does what, where, with whom and with what resources. Who can use what resource? Who makes decisions on how to use it? Who benefits from the resources? Use this information to identify who should be included, how to design your interventions and what is likely to affect men and women's participation.
- Involve men and women in prioritizing issues that are important to both groups. Make sure men and women present their opinions.
- Check how men and women members of a platform work together. How do they communicate with each other? How do they make decisions – as equals, or do the men dominate? What roles do they play? For example, is the chair always a man? Is the secretary a woman?

- Adapt to new situations as platforms develop; be aware of the risk of men and the more powerful members capturing a disproportionate share of benefits.

References

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Innovation platforms are widely used in agricultural research to connect different stakeholders to achieve common goals. This is one of a series of briefs to help guide the design and implementation of innovation platforms. A contribution to the CGIAR Livestock and Fish research program, the development of this brief was led by the International Livestock Research Institute; it draws on experiences of several ILRI projects as well as those of other CGIAR centres and partner organizations.

Credits

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