

Practical strategies for enhancing gender equality and social inclusion in Innovation Platforms: Examples from agriculture and natural resource management

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Convening of an innovation platform to improve the collective management of small water reservoirs in Burkina Faso.
Photo credit: Mansour Boundaogo

Innovation platforms (IPs) are gaining traction as means for supporting innovation in agriculture and natural resource management. Yet, little research has focused on the equitability of IP processes or the innovations they generate. This brief draws attention to the significance of power relations in IPs, with an emphasis on gender relations, in order to enhance social inclusion in and through platform processes and innovations.

INTRODUCTION

Innovation Platforms (IPs) are multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder ‘spaces’ that bring together actors with different interests in a specific area (e.g. an agricultural product value chain) to negotiate and develop innovations in a participatory manner (Schut et al. 2017). Their participatory nature is meant to ensure that agricultural innovations are not delivered to farmers in a top-down manner, but rather co-developed with farmers and other IP stakeholders.

Yet, power asymmetries within IPs threaten the inclusive innovation processes IPs are meant to generate (Swaans et al. 2014). As inherently political spaces, IPs can thus inadvertently exacerbate existing power imbalances, or become hijacked by more powerful members and misused (Swaans et al. 2013).

Skewed power relations occur not only vertically (across different types of stakeholder groups) but also horizontally, within communities. Richer farmers and businesspeople typically have more power than poorer community members, and can steer the conversation towards innovations that respond to their own strategic interests.

Gender is an important factor shaping social dynamics in IPs. As gender norms attribute different roles, rights and responsibilities to women and men, women and men may favor different innovations, and have unequal capacities and opportunities to participate in IPs. Yet, gender is rarely discussed within the context of IPs. This omission limits the potential to understand processes of cooperation and inclusion, or conversely exclusion, in IPs (Swaans et al. 2013), and poses several risks to the success and equitability of the innovations IPs generate.

RISKS OF IGNORING GENDER RELATIONS IN IPs

Power asymmetries among IP participants can lessen the efficacy of innovations developed and the equitable sharing of associated benefits (Tucker et al. 2014). Excluding women or gender considerations from IPs reproduces the status quo, and may exacerbate gender and social inequalities. Innovations generated through IPs can negatively impact women by burdening them with additional labor without generating commensurate benefits (Ragasa 2012),

which may also lead to the abandonment of proposed innovations.

Failing to tackle gender issues can result in limited IP success. For example, the International Livestock Research Institute’s (ILRI) project imGoats targeted poor men and women, but encountered problems in Mozambique, where the project was piloted. There, community leaders dominated the discussions and made the commercialization

and marketing of goats, which were considered a ‘man’s task’, the main focus of the IP (Swaans et al. 2014). Given this focus, women participants gradually stopped attending IP meetings. Women’s heavy domestic chores may also have contributed to women’s withdrawal from the imGoats project.

BENEFITS OF ENGAGING WITH GENDER RELATIONS IN IPs

Studies show that many benefits can be gained from integrating gender considerations in IPs, ranging from the creation of more equitable benefit-sharing mechanisms and the introduction of grievance mechanisms to uphold these mechanisms, to opportunities to support women's economic empowerment and gender and social equality (Adam et al. 2018; da Silva Wells 2008; Fatunbi et al. 2017). Fatunbi et al. (2017) show that women and members of marginalized groups who do participate in IPs can gain voice and influence in decision-making processes, not only in the platforms, but also in their households and communities. Even women who do not directly participate in IPs can benefit when IPs actively integrate gender issues in meetings and decision-making. For example, two successful IPs in Rwanda focused on potato and cassava value chains integrated a gender perspective into their design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation (Adam et al. 2018). Women producers gained opportunities to earn an income, and IP members (men and women) acquired shares that offered them dividends, which were equally distributed through legally established cooperatives. The cassava value chain IP offered women and men producers a quality check of the products, as well as new training opportunities. Women producers' access to credit through the IP allowed them to innovate and strengthen their entrepreneurship capacities, and their relative position in the community (ibid 2018).

ENTRY POINTS FOR ENHANCING GENDER AND SOCIAL INCLUSION CONSIDERATIONS IN IPs

Integrating gender and social inclusion considerations in IPs requires considering: 1) who participates; 2) how they participate (their voice and influence); and 3) what issues they address in the IP. Gender analyses conducted at the early stages and throughout the duration of IPs can reveal entry points for including women and fostering gender equality in and through the IP.

1. Who participates: Fostering equitable representation

It has been widely demonstrated that participation of a minimum number, or 'critical mass,' of women sensitive to gender issues in formal institutions and governing bodies can alter power dynamics and advance a gender-sensitive agenda (Dahlerup 1988). Agarwal (2014) shows that reaching a critical mass of women participants in the executive boards of community forest user groups encourages their meaningful participation, and enhances their confidence to state their opinions and advocate for their interests. Participation quotas requiring a minimum or equal participation of men and women in IP meetings and in key decision-making positions, committees and boards could therefore enhance women's representation.

Another important consideration is which women or men will participate in IPs to represent their interest group. Aside from gender, different axes of social marginalization (e.g. such as socio-economic status, generation, caste or ethnicity) interact to create distinct experiences of discrimination and marginalization (Cho et al. 2013, Kabeer 2015). The experiences of a better off woman can be quite different from those

of a poorer woman, or those of a young married woman different than those of an older widow. This begs the question of who is entitled to speak for whom (Spivak 1988). It is not sufficient to include token women in IPs if they do not share the strategic interests of those they are meant to represent.

As 'intersecting' identities position differentiated groups of women and men differently with respect to the issues addressed within IPs, inclusive measures will be needed to foster the active participation of these different groups' representatives. Representatives of collectives, such as women's or indigenous people's groups, are often well placed to play this role. The potato and cassava value chain IPs in Rwanda succeeded partly because they included strong grassroots women's organizations and producers groups. In addition to inviting representatives to participate in IPs, IPs may actively seek to support and strengthen these groups (Adam et al. 2018), or may be a space to initiate their creation if they do not already exist.

In some instances, it may be desirable to create women-only subgroups, or groups that bring together marginalized participants, such as lower caste groups or indigenous peoples, within an IP. These sub-groups can allow women to freely express their ideas and opinions, gain confidence, and develop a collective voice that can make itself heard in the larger IP. For example, in Palestine, the EMPOWER project considered different and divergent claims to water resources from women and other marginalized groups in collective decision-making through their participation in learning platforms. Since women remained silent in meetings, separate meetings were organized and a women's user association was founded to better coordinate their needs and interests and present them with a common, and stronger, voice (da Silva Wells 2008).

Of course, men can (and do) also champion gender issues within IPs, and should be enlisted as allies. Given gender norms that typically favor men's voice and influence in public deliberations and decisions, male champions can play a very valuable role in tabling gender issues in IPs. Promoting women's interests without including men can foment oppositional attitudes and hostility between genders in the household and at the community level (Lock, 2016) while demonstrating ways in which gender equality can benefit entire households and communities can encourage men's cooperation and support.

2. How they participate (voice and influence): enabling inclusive and meaningful participation

Women's presence in IPs does not equate with their active participation. Women's empowered participation in IPs is often thwarted by social norms that privilege men's voice in public affairs and decision-making forums (Adam et al. 2018), and which can make it difficult for women to be heard or can result in their active participation being considered altogether inappropriate (e.g. Agarwal 2001).

The use of several tools (Box 1) can shed light on the distribution of decision making power among IP stakeholders, and help identify ways to make IP processes more equal and inclusive (Boogard et al. 2013, Cullen 2013, Swaans et al. 2013, Cullen et al. 2014, Tucker et al. 2014, Fatunbi et al. 2017).

Box 1: Illustrative tools for stakeholder and social analysis

Stakeholder Power Analysis (IIED 2005c) and **Stakeholder Influence Mapping** (IIED 2005b), respectively, help identify and visually map stakeholders in a given context, their relative position (strong or weak) and their power to influence decision-making processes in a dynamic way, to better understand how this influence changes over time.

The Four Rs (IIED 2005a) focuses on roles and relationships among stakeholders. **Power analysis** (SIDA 2013) investigates the nature of power and power relations in a given context. The tool provides theoretical background to understand different forms and sources of power, and helps identify power asymmetries to shed light on how different socio-cultural identities affect social relations in different contexts.

The PowerCube (Pantazidou 2012) is an online interactive learning tool developed for the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) to identify sources and types of power and how they affect certain outcomes. It can be used for background research and in training and learning workshops.

Institutional and context analysis (UNDP 2012) help researchers and practitioners understand the political and institutional contexts of different countries, exploring concepts of power to identify agents of change.

A key determinant of the success of an IP relates to facilitation. Skilled facilitators who are trained in and attentive to gender issues, and those of marginalized groups, can help level power relations, improve women's participation, and foster a culture of sensitivity to gender and inclusion among IP members (Adam et al. 2018, Ayanwale et al. 2017, Mulema 2015, Fatunbi et al. 2014, Tucker et al. 2016, Swaans et al. 2013). Marginalized groups, including women, might need special support and facilitation to "take their side" in discussions with more powerful actors (Farnworth and Colverson 2015). A good facilitator will be able to equitably manage situations when there are conflicting interests among participants, and will be equipped with measures to support the empowered participation of women and marginalized groups in discussions and decisions. The gender and other social attributes of the facilitator (e.g. age, ethnic group, etc.) can also play a role in putting participants at ease. Working with a gender specialist to complement the facilitation team can contribute to making facilitation gender-sensitive.

Capacity strengthening on gender and social inclusion can also be directed at other IP stakeholders, including state, private sector, research, NGO, and local community representatives. These efforts should ideally take place as of the initial stages of an IP and can be intensified at critical moments to work through specific challenges. The ideas and reflections of participants on gender and inclusion issues during capacity building sessions and trainings should inform subsequent IP sessions (ILRI 2016).

Fostering the participation of women and marginalized groups also requires accounting for their (socially constructed) practical constraints – such as those related to time and mobility. Gender norms typically result in heavy labor burdens for women and in the need to be close to the home to perform certain domestic responsibilities (Grassi et al. 2015). These leave women less time to attend meetings, or may restrict their participation at specific times of day. Meeting venues may also be too far, or in places that are deemed inappropriate for women or difficult for them to access safely. Scheduling meetings at times and in places where women can effectively attend and facilitating transportation to meetings can promote their participation. Elias (2015) proposes several gender-responsive strategies for data collection, which range from identifying suitable places and times to engage with women participants, to using gender-responsive language, and facilitating discussions in inclusive ways.

3. What issues are addressed in the IP/Addressing the strategic interests of women and marginalized group

Ultimately, the goal of inclusive IPs is to table and equitably address the strategic interests of intended IP beneficiaries, including but not limited to IP participants. Integrating gender considerations in IPs can support development of more equitable innovations and enhance gender equality. Such social change in gender relations can occur beyond the IP or after it has outlived its purpose, if the IP addresses some of the underlying causes of gender inequality.

Farnworth and Colverson (2015) argue that most approaches to gender mainstreaming consist of conducting gender and context analysis to work around or within the social context. Yet, with the empowered participation of women role models from local communities or from other stakeholder groups, as well as male champions, IPs can actually be catalysts for social change. They can contribute to moving beyond the practical needs of IP beneficiaries towards strategic gender interests that relate to transforming unequal power relations among women and men (Molyneux 1985; Moser 1989). Dialogic approaches that stimulate critical reflection on social norms that perpetuate gender and other social inequalities (i.e. 'gender transformative approaches' (e.g. Kantor et al. 2015)) can be used in IPs to help achieve this goal.

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