Ganges Coastal Zone Platform Workshop

FINAL REPORT
18 JANUARY 2017

Towards better integration of R4D for improved food production systems in coastal zone of Bangladesh.
18-19 October 2016, Grand Mercure Bangkok Fortune

SUMMARY

A two-day meeting was held in Bangkok with the goal of establishing a platform for improved sharing, networking, complementarities and synergies across the many R4D projects on production systems (agriculture, aquaculture) and water management in the Ganges coastal zone. The focus of the workshop was the Bangladeshi coastal zone. The 36 participants included representatives of NARS, international R4D organization, donors and NGOs. The program and a list of invited participants are available at http://irri.org/networks/siil-polder-project-bangladesh.

The first one and half days focused on information sharing, with presentations from NARS and international R4D projects (all of which have many NARS and NGO partners) and organisations. The presentations are also available at http://irri.org/networks/siil-polder-project-bangladesh.

On the second afternoon, a half-day workshop was held to determine the desire for a network/platform ("platform"), and to identify the objectives, activities and possible outputs under such a platform.

Participants were very positive towards the idea of a platform, and saw the main objectives[1] as being:

- Sharing knowledge and information, with increased opportunity for this in or closer to "real" time
- Improving ways of working – harnessing synergies, better collaboration, sharing of knowledge, expertise etc.
- Improving communication and to wider audiences (stakeholders)
- Achieving greater impact - more efficient impact pathways, a single voice

The main types of proposed activities to be run under the platform were:

- biannual meetings plus field visits, the meetings to be held in local universities/research organizations.

A range of outputs for information sharing among platform participants and beyond was proposed:

- Annual project reports
- Newsletter
- Website
- Social media
- Policy briefs
- Joint papers
- Shared calendar of events[2]
- Conferences etc.

While some activities and outputs could be done within existing resources (NARS programs and international projects), additional funding would also be required. The need for strong NARS involvement and leadership was seen as important in such a platform.

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[1] Feedback on the draft report from one participant – "it would be good if these objectives could be set into a common vision, or overarching goal on what the platform is trying to achieve through such objectives"

[2] To take advantage of opportunities for overlapping visits and so that we could avoid conflicting dissemination activities

OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKSHOP

To determine the desire of the participants for some sort of network/platform for improved communication, interaction, integration…… across R4D projects

1. To identify the objectives of such a network/platform
2. To identify the types of activities/functions that might be conducted under such a network/platform

METHODS

Participants were allocated to 5 tables of 4-7 individuals, with a good mix across projects and organisations at each table.

A series of questions was put to participants for brainstorming at their tables. There were two sets of questions, with one plenary session after each. Each group recorded their responses on flip charts and explained their responses in plenary sessions. Notes were also taken of points raised during the plenary discussions. After the workshop, the responses of each group were summarized, and are presented here (dot points) together with notes from the discussions (see footnotes), and feedback on the draft report which was circulated to all participants.

RESULTS

Q1. What should be the objectives of the platform?

Most of the objectives proposed by the groups fell under four main themes related to improved sharing, ways of working, communication and impact, while a fifth objective was concerned with building the platform itself.

i. **Knowledge and information sharing (& nearer to "real" time) –** among the platform participants, outside the projects represented at the workshop (5)
ii. **Improved ways of working –** to create better synergies (3), improve research collaboration (1), come up with new ideas (1), facilitate resource sharing (2), create opportunities for cross-cutting dialogues (1), better coordination (1), avoid duplication (3)[3], avoid competition, identify key interventions for income generation and livelihood improvement, improved alignment of research activities with the master plan (1), interaction with organisations outside the projects[4]
iii. **Improved communication –** to wider audiences (stakeholders) (2)

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[3]In discussion on "avoiding duplication", the following points were raised:
- Not all duplication is bad; science is based on appropriate replication
- Do people in the group perceive it as a big problem? (it was mentioned by every table in response to the questions of objectives or benefits of a platform). Is it a real concern or just a perception? The group was reluctant to provide straightforward answers to this, but a neutral example of "poor coordination" was given: four different projects working on sunflower without having learned from each other's experiences
- Replication in multiple environments (adaptive agronomy) and relaying by different organizations/projects for drawing valid conclusions should be encouraged within the platform, rather than discouraged.

[4]How and when to bring in those whose interests overlap but who are not present in this discussion today?
- Identifying the other relevant partners is itself an advantage of the platform
- Could organize a broader forum occasionally (less than once/year) – the CPWF forum in 2014 is a successful example

iv. **Greater impact/more efficient impact pathways –** to develop a single voice[5] (1); provide greater credibility and visibility of findings (1) e.g. for advocacy, policy changes
v. **Identify interested parties to build and continue the platform** (1)

Q2. What would be the benefits & disadvantages of the platform? What would be the challenges?

Benefits

Consistent with the proposed objectives, greater efficiency of resource use, improved sharing, and improved communication and impact were the dominant benefits perceived by the groups. Some also suggested that such a platform would stimulate creative thinking and the development of more innovative ideas and assist in the development of future projects.

- **Greater efficiency**-avoid duplication (5), optimize resource use (1)
- **Improved sharing** – data, tools, ownership, information, knowledge of what others are doing, techniques, technologies & approaches, awareness of where expertise lies for different approaches/disciplines, multidisciplinarity (many)
- **Greater buy-in** with stakeholders
- **Improved communication** – more coordinated, real time update of progress/challenges (3)
- **Higher level of impact**, increase efficiency of delivery to stakeholders, higher profile among stakeholders (3)
- **Stimulate creative thinking**, more innovative ideas (2)
- **Improved sustainability** of the initiative[6] (1)
- **Development of future projects** (1)
- **Livelihood improvement of the CZ community** (1)

Disadvantages

The main disadvantage, identified by most groups, was the transaction costs of participating in the platform and coordinating the platform. It was also suggested that a platform could limit innovation.

- Transaction costs[7](4)
- Limit innovation (1)

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[5]On "preventing confusion among end users", there were concerns from DAE perspective:
        o Easier said than done
        o Who is going to come up with unified messages?
        o Who is going to make sure they are presented to the relevant end users?
        o Who will design the dissemination pathway?
[6]On "sustainability" of coastal zone activities: how would a platform help? It was suggested that
- The platform should be able to provide continuity of interactions among stakeholders between and around project funding cycles
- But how? No really specific ideas were put forward, beyond identifying that this sustainability would need to be initiated by the local stakeholders with the longest-lasting interest, rather than by fickle external donors
[7]In discussion on "transaction costs" the following points were made:
- What are the main costs?
        o Time and money for everyone who participates
        o Extra time and money for those who take on the burden of coordinating the platform activities; potential for unequal effort and benefit between stakeholders
- Timing of costs vs. benefits of collaboration are challenging; costs are up front, benefits will take longer to show up

Challenges/constraints[8]

The most common challenges raised were related to difficulties in sharing, different opinions, and institutional constraints

- **Difficulty of sharing**– issues of attribution/ ownership/recognition/branding/ownership; time-sharing among the actors for integration (unless steps were undertaken to reduce these)
- **Disagreement** - different opinions[9]; willingness for consensus
- **Institutional** - institute priorities; limitations in inter-institutional co-ordination; data sharing and attribution
- Time constraints
- Difficult to find development partners if it does not address their objectives
- Variation of time frame for each project
- No policy framework in integration

Q3. What functions/types of activities should be conducted under the platform to achieve the objectives? What types of outputs should be produced? Which activities/outputs would need additional funding ("extra $")?

Functions/activities

- Organise annual? bi-annual? meetings[10] (4)plus field visits (2); thematic meetings; establish common agenda; delegate activities (meet in local university/organisations)[11] (extra $)
- Identify researchable questions[12]; knowledge gaps (extra resources needed)
- Email forum[13](PLs only or wider?)
- Sharing – reports, training materials (attribution), operational problems, notification of events, information, data[14], knowledge
- Shared field sites (adhoc, may need extra resources)
- Provide training services
- Conduct policy dialogues, invite and update policy makers (extra $)
- Get funding – explore opportunities (regular donors, crowd funding?); innovation fund/challenge fund (extra $)

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[8] Feedback on the draft report – "Like all groups, a governance model would need to be developed after forming a platform"

[9] In the discussion it was suggested that differences in opinions and perspectives would actually be an advantage

[10] Attendance of international partners not mandatory, but if you happen to be there, you can participate; it was suggested that on-the-ground partners would provide continuity by being present at most of the meetings, and that meetings could be hosted and organized by universities/organisations in Bangladesh

[11] There was quite a bit of discussion on how organizations could lead the meetings in rotation to foster openness

[12] On "research questions": we're already good at this within projects; what would be the added value of doing this as a platform? It was suggested that the platform would
- Improve the quality of the research questions through discussion from multiple perspectives
- Enable participants to take advantage of each other's different areas of expertise to come up with plans for answering the questions

[13] Could be as simple as notifying each other of planned sited visits to encourage on-site interactions

[14] Need a mechanism; in public domain

Types of outputs

- Annual project reports[15](2)
- Newsletter – could piggy back on Polder Tidings (SIIL project newsletter)[16] (extra $)
- Website (4) - led by NARS (MOA/BARC)? (extra $?)
- Social media information sharing (extra $)
- Policy briefs
- Joint papers
- Shared calendar of events[17]
- Hold events with wider audience - conference/forum/workshop (extra $)

REPORT AUTHORS

The report was drafted by Liz Humphreys, based on the discussion among NARES and international organisations, the information on the flip charts prepared by the workshop participants in groups, the discussion notes taken by Sarah Beebout. The draft report was circulated to all participants and revised in consideration of the feedback received from several participants.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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[15]On "annual reports": who are they for?

- For internal audience (among stakeholders within the platform), the following could be useful:
  - Avoid 'show and tell' reporting, which tends to get cut and pasted from reports that each project is already doing anyway
  - Write short highlights of the past time period
  - Highlight areas where you think your project could benefit from coordination with other projects or could offer input to other projects
- For external audiences, consider the following:
  - Present a 'unified voice' ("but a choir needs a lot of practice before it sounds good"), especially in policy dialogues
  - Create a unified story to explain the bigger picture to those not yet involved

[16] Post workshop feedback from one participant "It's best to have this platform independent of the projects it makes up"

[17]So that we could take advantage of opportunities for overlapping visits and so that we could avoid causing conflict in dissemination activities