



INITIATIVE ON
Agroecology



INITIATIVE ON
NEXUS Gains



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Low-Emission
Food Systems

Assessing Multistakeholder Processes: Needs and possible responses in three CGIAR Initiatives

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1. Introduction

Multistakeholder processes (MSPs) are becoming increasingly important in international development research. MSPs are defined as “purposefully organized interactive processes that bring together stakeholders to participate in dialogue, decision-making and/or implementation regarding actions seeking to address a problem they hold in common or to achieve a goal for their common benefit” (Sarmiento Barletti- et al 2020). The main rationale for promoting MSPs within One CGIAR research activities is that well-organized MSPs can help ensure that the research is trusted and used by the intended users of research (Matson et al 2016). It also provides the means for more equitable and democratic decision making to guide the research process, making sure that the defined research priorities reflect questions and topics that the group of stakeholders consider important (Larson et al 2022).

Many CGIAR Researchers and their partners now consider MSPs as the most appropriate way of engaging stakeholders in research activities with the goal of generating meaningful, long-lasting impacts. CGIAR Researchers are also learning that to make MSPs work effectively, it is not enough to merely invite people to the table; these processes need to become a space where participants can begin to address questions of power, equity and buy-in (Baker et al 2021)

More specifically, previous research has found that MSPs are effective when the organizers of these processes are able to: (a) elevate the voices of marginalized groups; (b) build trust by helping actors understand others’ perspectives and the value of meaningful, equitable collaboration; (c) support conflict resolution and (d) foster social learning through self-assessment and reflection (Brouwer et al 2016). One of the central challenges facing the CGIAR currently is to develop an approach to MSPs that not only embraces these principles, but is also practical, flexible and not too costly.

2. Assessment Questions

The purpose of this technical note is to assess the existing conditions for supporting effective MSP work, focusing on three CGIAR initiatives: NEXUS Gains, Mitigate+, and Agroecology. The rest of the report is structured around three major questions that will guide the assessment of the current state of MSP work in the three initiatives.

1. To what extent do researchers understand the concept and appreciate the relevance of MSP work?
2. Which challenges, risks, and obstacles to MSP work are most significant?
3. What are some possible organizational RESPONSES to the identified needs?

3. Assessment sources

To address these questions, the assessment draws on three sources of data. The first, and main source of assessment data, comes from an online survey distributed to all researchers affiliated with the three initiatives. In addition, the consultant conducted interviews with initiative leaders and participated in two online workshops. The assessment combines data from these three data sources to address the three assessment questions.

The online survey, which consisted of 15 questions, was distributed in mid January of 2023 (full questionnaire available in the Appendix). Participation in the survey was completely voluntary and lasted on average about 12 minutes. Twenty-four researchers from the three initiatives participated in the survey. Figure 1 displays a breakdown of the respondents’ initiative affiliations.

Was the sample representative? The sample of participants is likely not completely representative of the population of researchers in the three initiatives. The main reason for this possible sample bias is related to the origins of the survey. The invitation to participate in the survey was sent out by Ruth Meinzen-Dick and Ryan Nehring of IFPRI. They are leading an initiative to start a Community of Practice around MSP work. Their well-known support of MSP work across the CGIAR may have affected who decided to participate in the survey. Supporters of MSPs, as well as those individuals who are most involved with MSP implementation, are more likely to participate in the survey, while MSP skeptics would be expected to less likely to participate. Hence, the 24 individuals who constitute the sample here are plausibly more supportive of MSPs compared to the CGIAR population of researchers at large.

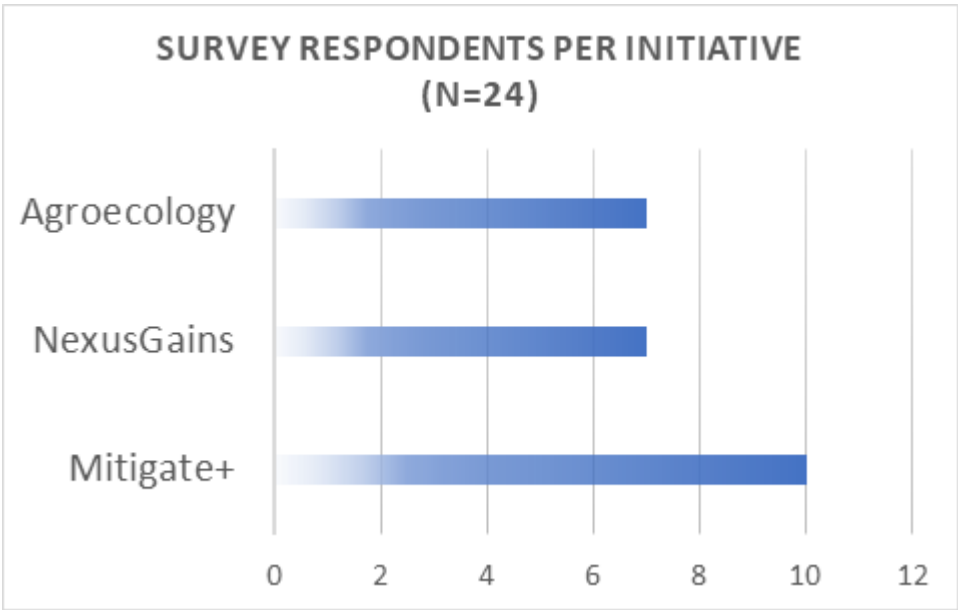


Figure 1: Participants in the online survey, broken down by initiative (n=24).

Such bias notwithstanding, it does not invalidate the results or make them any less useful for assessment purposes. The main goal of this questionnaire was not to ascertain the degree of support for MSPs among CGIAR researchers or even in the three initiatives under study. The goal was rather to identify needs and capabilities associated with the organization and implementation of MSPs in planned research activities. Even with a sample that may be biased and disproportionately favorable to MSP work, the survey will still yield valuable inputs when it comes to the identification of such needs and capabilities, because these inputs come from people who have relevant experience related to MSPs and who are genuinely interested in making such initiatives work. Interpreting the findings in light of such biases will strengthen the validity of the conclusions.

In the sections that follow, the assessment addressed the three main questions by first discussing the survey responses related to the question followed by relevant inputs from workshop participants and comments by initiative leaders revealed through personal interviews.

4. To what extent do Initiative researchers understand and appreciate the relevance of MSP work?

The questionnaire asked respondents to self-assess their level of understanding of MSPs. Most respondents reported an advanced understanding of these processes, with only three out of the 24 respondents indicated that they did not have a good understanding of the concepts.

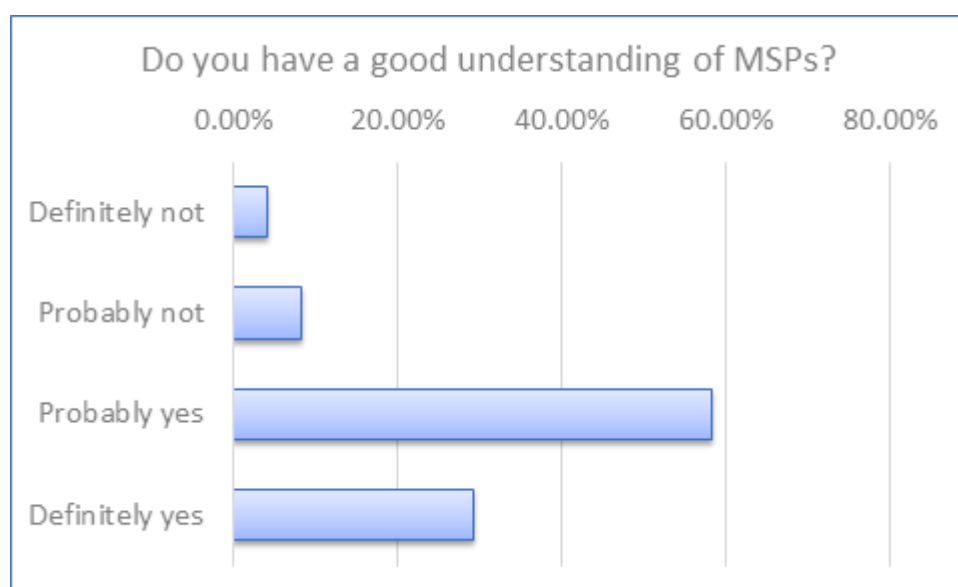


Figure 2: Distribution of responses from 24 survey respondents.

Most respondents also believe that MSPs are necessary for achieving the ultimate objectives of their research activities; on the question regarding the degree to which MSPs are necessary for achieving your project activities' objectives, 23 out of the 24 respondents answer "yes" or "definitely yes."

When asked to expand on their answers, several thoughtful explanations were offered: One respondent shared that "They [MSPs] are required to anchor and scale the work that we are doing in each of these projects. They are the means to make our research findings usable as they allow development of trust, legitimacy and social learning throughout the research process ". Another respondent explained that "They [MSPs] are the primary mechanism for co-designing solutions and giving the initiatives directions."

These views of why MSPs are important for the work of the three initiatives were reinforced by the results of the interviews with initiative leaders. One of these leaders offered the following justification for why MSPs are needed: If our research is going to influence policy and practice, it needs to speak to the concerns and aspirations of policy makers and practitioners. MSPs provide a space for researchers, policy actors and practitioners to identify opportunities for doing things together that cannot be done by each actor individually".

Another initiative leader took a more pragmatic approach to addressing the question about the importance of MSPs, saying that "MSPs constitute the main causal pathway between conducting research activities and achieving policy impact. Most of our funding proposals and work plans acknowledge this, so whether we like it or not, MSPs have become a major component of all almost all our research activities."

These comments from initiative leaders are consistent with Inputs from the Jan 23 workshop. In the workshop participants discussed different perspectives on why MSPs are needed for their research projects. Workshop participants agreed on three things related to the main contribution of MSPs:

1. MSPs “provide the structure for inclusive governance” an explicit goal of all One CGIAR activities. Such structures are particularly important in places where there are weak or non-existing institutions that promote equitable participation in decision making.
2. MSPs help to address issues of scale because they are “important for the coordination of national programs, for scaling-up processes and transdisciplinary co-creation of innovations”.
3. MSPs are fundamental for “linking knowledge with action”.

4.1 Summative assessment of the current levels of understanding, appreciation, and experience with MSP work

Based on these three sources of data, most members of the three initiatives appear to have a solid understanding of MSPs, and appreciate the relevance of organizing MSPs in order for their research to affect policy and practice. That said, according to initiative leaders there are still a significant number of researchers who remain reluctant to embrace MSPs as a new approach to stakeholder engagement in research. They find the new model to be costly to adopt. It would be important to find out more about the constraints that these researchers face and why they do not believe MSPs to be necessary.

Most researchers still have relatively limited experience in supporting stakeholders in MSP design and implementation. As researchers gain more experience and learn how to organize, facilitate, and energize these processes, it would be important to offer opportunities for researchers to share their lessons with other members of the CGIAR. The proposed Community of Practice for MSPs, discussed in the final section of this technical note, would help meet this need.

5. Which are the most significant challenges, risks and obstacles associated with MSPs?

While the majority of CGIAR researchers seem convinced that MSPs form an essential part of their current research agendas, they also recognize that there are many challenges associated with MSP work.

The participants in the December 13, 2022 workshop identified several challenges. The most common was a lack of a shared understanding of MSPs among all CGIAR researchers – and this was most apparent when discussing inclusion and power in MSPs. Participants also noted that while MSPs provide a general framework for engaging in meaningful partnerships with stakeholders, there is no one size that fits all. Participants argued that local context matters a great deal, and one participant considered that merely collaborating with existing prominent stakeholders might just reinforce the existing and quite lopsided power structures. For these reasons, participants agreed that there needs to be a general framework for One CGIAR at the global level that is general enough to be applicable but at the same time flexible so that it may be adaptable to local circumstances.



Figure 3: Word cloud generated at Workshop held on Zoom on Jan 23, 2023.

The facilitators of the workshop asked participants to describe in 2-3 words what they viewed as the most significant challenges associated with the organization and implementation of MSP work. These responses were used to create a word cloud, shown in Figure 3 below. Based on these keywords, it appears that most workshop participants perceive the issues of equitable participation and inclusion in MSPs to constitute the most significant challenges to effective MSP work.

Respondents to the online survey offer some additional details when it comes to specific challenges and risks associated with MSPs. The online questionnaire asked whether the researchers perceived any risks associated with the promotion of MSPs. As can be observed in Figure 4 below, most respondents agreed that there are risks associated with MSP work.

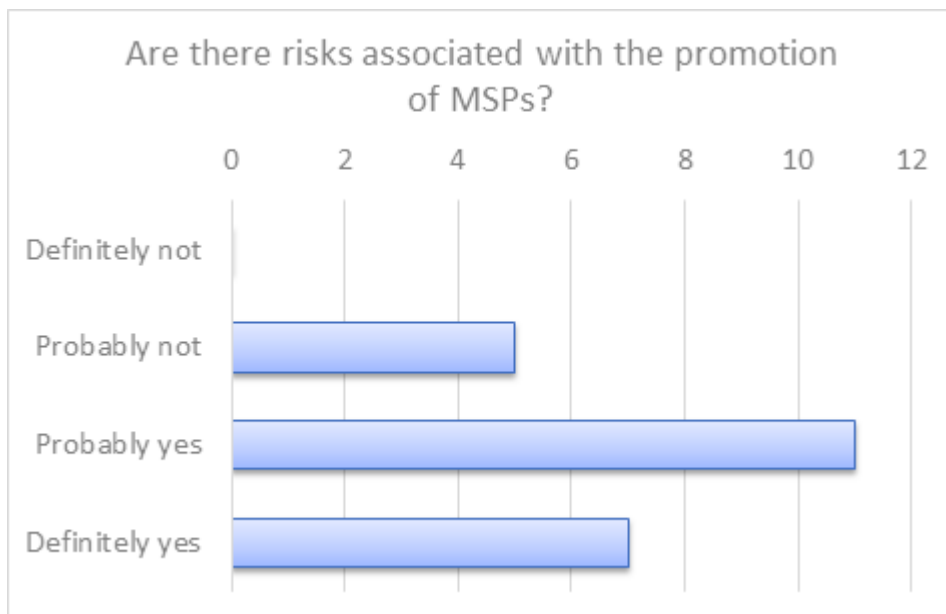


Figure 4. Distribution of survey responses on perceptions of risks (n=24).

The survey then asked respondents to select explain their answers and elaborate on what they perceive as the major risks. Respondents offered several examples of such perceived risks, including:

- The domination of elites, government actors, in MSPs, which could lead to a reinforcing of cleavages and inequities
- The duplication of decision spaces, and the possible weakening of the legitimacy of existing system of political representation.
- Rejection by the local decision-making system, which in turn could lead to failed governance.

To get a better grasp of the variety of challenges currently faced by CGIAR researchers, the survey presented the respondents with a list of several potential challenges and asked respondents to select those that are most prominent in their work. Figure 5 displays the distribution of responses.

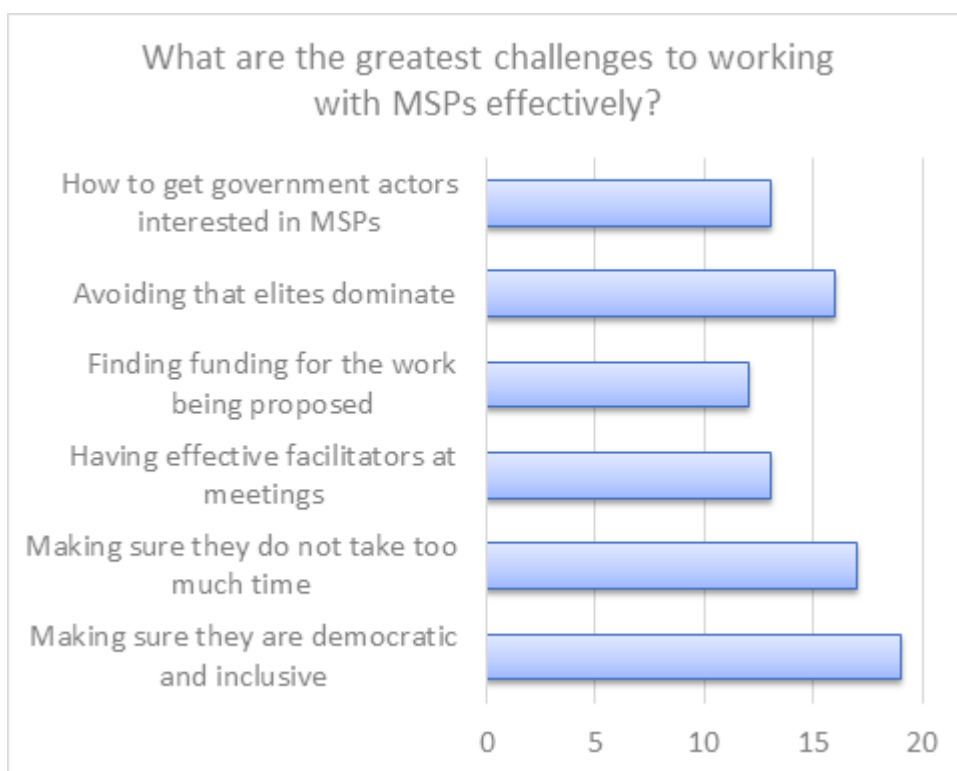


Figure 5: Distribution of responses to online questionnaire question about most significant challenges to MSP work (author's elaboration)

Consistent with workshop participants and leadership interviews, the challenges that rise to the top of the CGIAR researchers' list are issues related to making sure that MSPs are (1) inclusive and democratic; (2) not too time consuming, and (3) not dominated by traditional elites. When asked to elaborate on these answers, respondents offered several insightful comments related to perceived challenges of MSPs, including the challenges of

"The greatest challenge is probably getting government actors on board, but once they are in avoid that they dominate the work"

"The nature of MSP sometimes starts to mimic power inequalities of the society, and often do not have enough strategies to address power and inclusion issues. To deal with such problems, there is strong need to establish clear understanding of purpose, scope, definition, and nature of the platform and develop cohesive, bottom up, inclusive and equitable practices for engagements."

One of the central challenges to MSP work that these responses highlight is that MSPs can serve to create a new institutional space in contexts often characterized by the absence of governance institutions. MSPs can bring a diverse set of actors together to deliberate on problems and solutions -- actors that may otherwise not deliberate or work together. In such cases, MSPs do not replace existing governmental bodies, but seek to complement them by adding spaces to where such opportunities to engage citizens and interests previously did not exist. This complementary governance function is particularly important in countries with weak or missing institutional arrangements for research, planning, and development.

5.1 Summative assessment

All three data sources point to multiple challenges associated with the implementation of MSPs. While the specific challenges vary from specific context to context, there are a three general categories of challenges that emerge from the three data sources. First, many researchers recognize the difficulty of making MSPs equitable spaces of representation where all participants have equal say and influence. It is difficult to create a forum that does not replicate the power asymmetries and other inequalities that characterize most decision spaces in societies. CGIAR research that seeks to influence governmental decisions and practice faces the challenge of finding ways of engaging governmental actors without having them completely dominate the conversation in the MSP meetings.

Another common challenge is related to the high costs associated with the organization and implementation of MSPs. Researchers refer to two types of costs -- time and financial burden. MSPs can be very time-consuming, especially in the early stages of the processes, before routines are established and participants agree on procedures of order and decision making. The high start-up costs suggest that the fruits of the work are not necessarily seen in the first year of an MSP, but rather after several years of working together. In that sense, MSPs operate on a longer time scale than most individual research projects.

The economic costs of MSPs can also be significant, especially when it comes to the financing of the activities and strategies that the MSP actors agree should be pursued as responses to observed problems. These response activities may cost more than the CGIAR project can and should pay for and if new resources need to be raised, it can add significant transaction costs to the MSP process. Some CGIAR MSPs have successfully engaged actors, such as international donors, private firms, as well as governmental actors who have the financial means and interest in supporting the MSP-defined work plans. Other researcher projects have had success in using seed money and matching grants as a way to induce financial commitments to MSPs from the MSP participating organizations directly.

Finally, most researchers agree that there is a need for One CGIAR to offer more ongoing technical support to researchers who are currently facing many of these MSP challenges on their own. The vast majority of researchers in the three initiatives who participated in the workshops, the personal interviews, and the online questionnaire welcomed the idea of establishing a support network, or community of practice, which could provide such support. A community of practice is one of the possible responses to the observed challenges associated with ongoing MSP work, but the needs assessment identified several others, which are discussed below.

6. What are some possible organizational responses to the identified needs and challenges?

The consulted One CGIAR Researchers agreed that to work effectively with MSPs there needs to be a general framework for MSP work, including guidance documents and technical support, at the global level. This support framework should be flexible for adaptation to a variety of local circumstances. More specific organizational responses were captured through the online questionnaire with an open-ended question about how their initiative leadership ought to respond to the most urgent needs (as perceived by the researcher). Most responses dealt with one of three major issues: (1) provide ongoing training and technical support; (2) improve coordination with other One CGIAR actors, such as country offices as well as other MSP initiatives, and (3) support development of in-depth scientific knowledge about the conditions that facilitate effective MSP work. The proposed Community of Practice about MSP within One CGIAR is an organizational response that has the potential to take on all three of the identified issues.

6.1 Toward a Community of Practice for MSPs

A community of practice (COP) is a group of people who share an interest in a topic, are willing to share personal experiences, best practices, contributing to new knowledge development, and doing so, agrees to interact regularly either in person or via online platforms. The proposed community of practice focusing on MSPs would consist of a network of CGIAR researchers who are committed to conducting responsible MSP work as well as sharing lessons on how to do so. The initiative leaders agreed that the COP should have a two-fold purpose: First, to provide researchers with support for how to engage stakeholders through MSPs, and second, to support research about MSP work, building on the lessons learned from MSP work within the CGIAR and beyond. The next section sketches out a possible organization for the Community of Practice focusing on MSPs within the One CGIAR.

6.1.1 Organization

To coordinate the COP activities, the network would create a hub at one of the participating initiatives or Centers. The hub would host the COPs coordinator, possibly a One CGIAR researcher, who would dedicate part of his or her time to coordinating the COP. The responsibility for hosting this position could be rotated among the various participating initiatives. The COP coordinator would (1) respond to requests for assistance from network members; (2) broker contacts between researchers with similar interests, issues, or concerns; (3) keep COP members updated with regards to resources and meetings relevant for ongoing MSP work; (4) compile a best-practice resource - an online, searchable data base with up-to-date resources for MSP work including field manuals, concept notes, and research on MSPs, (5) help researchers investigate the causal factors that shape

MSP performance, as well as creative ways of measuring such performance, and (6) host monthly webinars and workshops on themes of particular interest to members of the network.

6.1.2 Supporting research on MSPs

Apart from providing ongoing guidance to members of the COP on how to implement effective MSP activities, the COP and its members would seek to contribute to developing new knowledge about the creation and facilitation of effective MSPs. Such research would benefit from collecting systematic data about the MSPs in which the COP members themselves are actively involved and have first-hand knowledge. The data collection would be collectively defined by COP researchers through a processes that invites the submission of theoretical propositions about the factors that may help or hinder the successful organization and functioning of MSPs. Once these theoretical ideas have been prioritized, researchers are in a position to draft a list of variables and possible measures such variables that could eventually be analyzed and used to test theoretical ideas. Once variables and measures have been agreed upon, COP researchers can discuss and agree on an appropriate coding form.

The COP participants would then work with IT specialists to create a user-friendly application that makes for efficient and accurate data recording. Each MSP researcher is responsible for coding their own experiences according to the agreed upon form and application instructions. The hope is that such a universal procedure would generate comparable data for MSP processes in a large variety of situations and contexts -- data that may be used for comparative analyses using both quantitative and qualitative analytical methods.

The idea of a community of practice of researchers following a common coding protocol is similar to that of the International Forests, Resources, and Institutions (IFRI) research program and the Poverty and Environment Network (PEN). Both these research networks not only helped produce a large body of literature on environmental governance in developing countries, but also helped train a large number of researchers in the analysis of human-environmental interactions. Similarly, the COP-supported research activities on MSP would support scholars to move beyond their traditional analyses (e.g. of human environmental interactions and how these influence development outcomes) to gain new insights into how their research can help people - by engaging users, farmers, decisionmakers and practitioners in MSPs - to achieve better outcomes.

6.2 Is a community of practice viable and supported among One CGIAR researchers?

The vast majority of Individuals who participated in this assessment expressed their support of not only creating such a Community of Practice but also actively contributing to it. The result of the online questionnaire, shown in Figure 6 below, demonstrates the high level of support for a COP within the three initiatives.

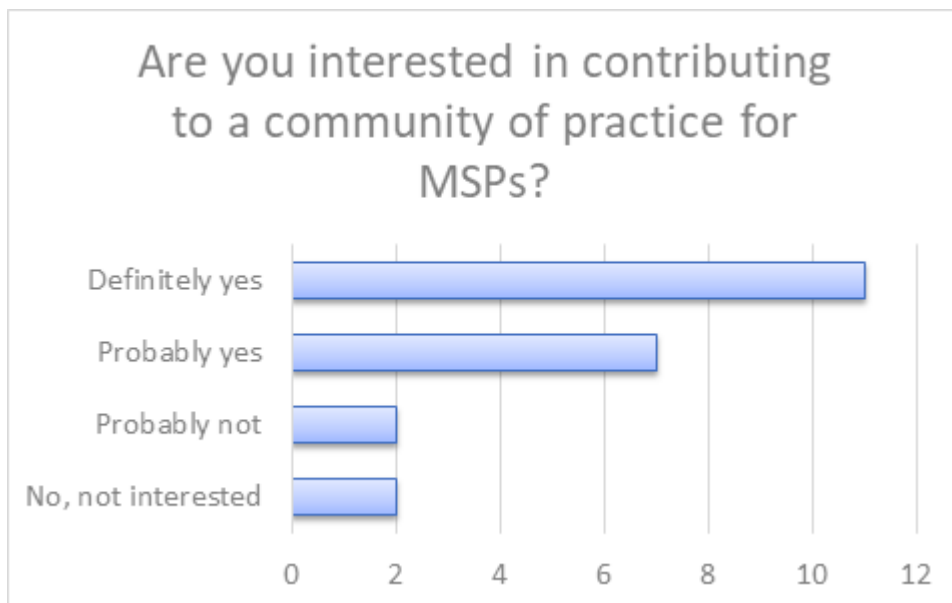


Figure 6: Level of support for a community of practice for MSP

With such a high level of support - even enthusiasm - for creating a community of practice, leaders in the three initiatives have an opportunity to engage members of their groups to generate ideas on how such as network may be designed to be as meaningful as possible.

Creating a community of practice can help researchers get the most out of their efforts to work with MSPs, minimizing the costs (time and resources individuals spend on getting MSPs off the ground and working properly) while seeking to maximize the collective benefits of MSP led research (achieving greater equity and representation in research partnerships, greater policy impacts). In the absence of such support networks, there is a risk that perceived costs prevent researchers from embracing and pursuing MSPs as an integral part of their research programs. The interviews with initiative leaders revealed that there are

colleagues who perceive MSPs to represent a tradeoff between research excellence and policy relevance. Without active MSP support to all initiative researchers, there is a risk that such ideas gain a foothold.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The report assessed the current needs and challenges associated with Multistakeholder Processes in three initiatives under One CGIAR: Agroecology, Mitigate+, and NegusGains. The assessment is based on an analysis of three independent sources of observations: An online questionnaire, two webinars about MSPs, and interviews with initiative researchers.

7.1 Assessment Findings

The analysis of these data sources suggests at least five broad patterns related to researchers' relationships to MSPs:

1. Many of the researchers in the three initiatives have a high level of understanding and appreciation MSP work, but there is still quite a few individuals within these initiatives who resist fully embracing the idea.
2. Many researchers are concerned about the lack of coordination with existing platforms and initiatives.
3. The most frequently cited limitation of MSP work is the great amount of time that MSPs require from researchers and their partners.
4. It is challenging to create MSPs that are equitable and inclusive and avoid replicating the social and political cleavages that are commonplace where the initiatives conduct research.
5. There is strong support for the creation of a community of practice to offer continuing support to initiative researchers who are engaged with MSP work.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on its core findings, the technical note proposes several possible organizational responses, detailed below.

1. **Offer more technical and sensitivity training opportunities related to MSPs.** While most of the respondents to the online questionnaire indicated a very high, self-reported level of understanding of MSPs, most initiative researchers reveal that they have limited practical experience in working directly with MSPs. Moreover, initiative leaders acknowledged that there are several individual researchers in their groups who remain skeptical to the idea of MSP work. These observations suggest that there is need for both technical training to those already engaged in MSP work, as well as sensitivity training for those who may need to learn more about MSPs may be organized to avoid some of the perceived costs associated with their implementation. It may be that these types of training activities are offered during onboarding and orientation activities for new co-workers so that they know how to find resources related to MSP work.
2. **Support initiative champions of MSP work.** Peer-to-peer learning is an effective way of promoting greater acceptance and embrace of MSP-guided research activities. Identifying and supporting researchers within each of the initiatives who are willing and motivated to share their experience, and serve as their initiative's "MSP champion", or MSP resource person, can help reduce the costs and increase the benefits associated with the implementation of MSPs.
3. **Improve coordination with and build on existing multistakeholder processes.** A commonly perceived risk associated with the implementation of MSPs is that it can complicate the work of existing organizations and initiatives, duplicating efforts, and weakening some of these existing planning and decision-making processes. To address such concerns, it is important to involve those MSP participants who have an intimate knowledge of the existing decision making arenas in the research context, e.g. the county offices for IFPRI or other CG centers, so that the initiatives' MSPs are as efficient as possible.
4. **Launch a Consortium-wide Community of Practice (CoP) to provide guidance to CGIAR researchers .** The target audience for the CoP are researchers interested in using MSPs to achieve greater equity and effectiveness in their research activities. A community of practice can be a relatively low-cost organizational response to rising demand for technical support for busy researchers. To start, the CoP could appoint one CoP coordinator who will serve as an interlocutor, connecting expertise seeking people with the MSP champions and experts within the network. The three initiatives committed to the CoP might take turns assuming this role, selecting and assigning a person within their ranks to perform his function as part of their formal job description.
5. **Support Collaborative Research on MSPs.** There is a dearth of knowledge about the factors and conditions that support successful MSPs. Several initiative researchers are well positioned to (continue to) contribute to new

knowledge about MSP work. One possibility is to use the existing MSP work as a living laboratory for future MSP work and guidelines. This could be done by building a context-rich database using inputs from Initiative researchers who would be asked to code a set of pre-defined variables for their existing partnerships. This shared research protocol would generate valuable data for testing new ideas about MSP effectiveness. Such research would not only produce new knowledge that can help researchers do effective coproduction for greater policy impact, but it would also serve as a model for other research programs within One CGIAR.

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Appendix: Online Survey

CGIAR CoP MSP questionnaire (Jan 12, 2023)

Start of Block: Default Question Block

1. Which CGIAR initiative(s) do you primarily work with?

2. Do you have a clear understanding of what a Multistakeholder Platform (MSP) is?
 - Definitely not (1)
 - Probably not (2)
 - Probably yes (3)
 - Definitely yes (4)

3. Are you personally involved with any (planned or current) MSPs at the moment?
 - None (1)
 - One (2)
 - 2-4 (3)
 - >4 (4)

4. Do you think MSPs are necessary for achieving your project activities' objectives?
 - Definitely not (1)
 - Probably not (2)
 - Probably yes (3)
 - Definitely yes (4)

4.b. In 1-2 sentences, could you please explain your answer to the previous question?

5. Do you see any risks associated with the promotion of MSPs?
- Definitely not (1)
 - Probably not (2)
 - Probably yes (3)
 - Definitely yes (4)

Display This Question:

*If Do you see any risks associated with the promotion of MSPs? = Probably yes
Or Do you see any risks associated with the promotion of MSPs? = Definitely yes*

5.b. In a few words, could you please explain what you see as the major risks associated with MSPs?

6. In your view, what are some of the greatest challenges in working with MSPs effectively (mark all that apply)?
- Making sure they are democratic and inclusive (1)
 - Making sure they do not take too much time (2)
 - Having effective facilitators at meetings (3)
 - Finding funding for the work being proposed (4)
 - Avoiding that elites dominate (5)
 - How to get government actors interested in MSPs (6)
 - Other (7) _____

6.b. In 1-2 sentences, could you please explain your answer to the previous question about the greatest challenges?

Page Break

7. In your opinion, what is the most important and urgent unmet need that your CGIAR initiative is currently facing when it comes to MSPs?
-

Page Break

8. In your opinion, what should be done to address the most important unmet need identified above?
-

Page Break

9. What recommendations do you have for your initiative's leadership when it comes to the promotion and implementation of MSPs?
-

Page Break

10. Finally, there is a cross-initiative proposal to create a Community of Practice to support work on MSPs within the CGIAR. Would you be interested in learning more about, and potentially contributing to such a Community of Practice?

- No, not interested (1)
- Probably not (2)
- Probably yes (3)
- Definitely yes (4)

End of Block: Default Question Block

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