

Research Application Summary

**Influence of organizational structure on actor interaction within community level innovation platforms in eastern Uganda**

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**Abstract**

Several studies indicate how the self-organizing nature of innovation platforms (IPs) influences actor interaction and networking. However, most of these studies tend to be biased towards the high level IPs. This study assessed how organizational structures within community level IPs influenced actor interaction. Data were collected from two community IPs in eastern Uganda which were engaged in the production and marketing of cassava and cassava based products through focus group discussions and key informant interviews. Group size, the decision-making process and internal rules and regulations shaped the structure of the community IPs and ultimately influenced the way actors related and shared information. Members within the small homogeneous groups felt more inclined to work together and willingly shared information due to the enhanced cohesion among them. The higher degree of cohesiveness within the groups promoted engagements among the members. Participatory decision-making provided opportunities for actors to freely air out their views regarding the key issues affecting the platform which consequently enhanced information sharing. Effective enforcement of rules and regulations in the IP influenced how actors related and shared information.

Key word: Cassava, cohesion, decision making, group structure, organisational structure

**Résumé**

Plusieurs études indiquent comment la nature de l'auto-organisation des plateformes d'innovations (PIs) influence l'interaction entre les acteurs et le réseautage. Cependant, la plupart de ces études ont tendance à être biaisées en ce qui concerne les hauts niveaux des plateformes d'innovations. Cette étude a évalué comment les structures organisationnelles au sein des PIs au niveau communautaire influence l'interaction des acteurs. Les données ont été recueillies auprès de deux plateformes d'innovations dans l'Est de l'Ouganda qui sont engagées dans la production et la commercialisation du manioc et des produits dérivés du manioc grâce à des discussions de groupes et des entretiens avec les informateurs clés. La taille du groupe, le processus de prise de décision, les règles internes et les réglementations construisent la structure des PIs de la communauté et par ricochet influence les liens et le partage d'informations entre acteurs. Les membres de petits groupes homogènes ont tendance à travailler ensemble et à spontanément partager les informations en raison de la forte cohésion existante entre eux. Le plus haut degré de cohésion au sein des groupes favorise les engagements entre les membres. La prise de décision participative a permis aux acteurs de donner librement leurs points de vue sur les principaux enjeux de la

plate-forme ce qui, par conséquent a amélioré le partage de l'information. L'application effective des règles et règlements au sein des plateformes d'Innovations a influencé la nature des liens entre les acteurs et le partage de l'information entre ces derniers.

Mot clé: Manioc, cohésion, prise de décision, structure du groupe, structure organisationnelle

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## **Background**

Innovation Platforms (IPs) have gained popularity in research and development initiatives because of their potential to promote agricultural innovation and development, and their ability to engage stakeholders to respond to context specific problems facing farmers. The IPs provide a good forum for bringing together groups of diverse actors along a given value chain (Adekunle and Fatunbi, 2012) with the aim of promoting continuous interaction, knowledge and information sharing and joint learning and innovation through action research for the mutual benefit of all actors (Abenakyo and Mazur, 2015). Most research tends to focus on organizational structure and knowledge sharing within high level (regional and national) IPs with less emphasis on community level IPs. Yet in practice, community level IPs are very important in responding to smallholder farmers' context. There is limited knowledge of how organizational structures of community level IPs influence diverse actor interaction to share information and make collective decisions to address emerging needs. This study therefore sought to assess how the organizational structure influenced actor interaction within community level IPs by assessing how the organizational structure in terms of group size, decision-making process and rules and regulations influenced actor interaction.

## **Literature Summary**

In literature, the term innovation platform is used to refer to physical, virtual or physico-virtual network of actors deliberately organized to facilitate and undertake various activities around a mutually identified commodity or system to foster collaboration, partnership and mutual focus to generate innovation on the commodity/system (Cullen *et al.*, 2014). For this study, an IP is conceptualized as a forum that facilitates interaction and networking of different actors along any value chain in order to achieve a common objective and bring about desired change.

The mix of actors in an IP network promotes complementarity and synergy resulting in better information sharing and innovative capacity of actors within the network (Adekunle and Fatunbi, 2012). However, effective actor interaction and learning depend on a number of factors including the organizational structure, timely information and feedback mechanisms, and the institutional environment (rules and regulations) which shape trust-based relationships (Kilerkx *et al.*, 2010; Ayele *et al.*, 2012). In this article, actor interaction refers to the extent to which actors interact with others in terms of frequency to meetings to share knowledge and information.

Organizational structures are very critical in influencing actor interactions and their ability to successfully adopt and implement innovations (Chen and Huang, 2007; Willem and Buelens, 2009). Organizational structure is conceptualized as the arrangement of individuals in groups/networks to perform certain tasks and achieve common objectives. Existing literature presents four categories of organizational structure, i.e., formalization, centralization, integration/coordination and specialization (Chen and Huang, 2007; Willem and Buelens, 2009). Formalized structures have standardized tasks and explicit rules and procedures guiding human behavior while in centralized structures decision-making is concentrated at the top of the hierarchy. Both formal and informal rules have been found to be very key in influencing the behavior of actors within any organizational structure.

### **Study Description**

A qualitative case study was undertaken in Serere and Bukedea districts in Eastern Uganda where the Cassava Community Action Research Project (Cassava CARP) is piloting its activities. The Cassava CARP, with existing IPs, is promoting community-based sustainable production and marketing of cassava-based products in the districts of Serere and Bukedea (Eastern), and Kole and Apac (Northern). Cassava CARP enhances dialogue between farmers and other actors along the cassava value chain. Two community level IPs in eastern Uganda, i.e., Soroti Sweet Potato Producers and Processors Association (SOSPPA) in Serere and P'KWI (Popular Knowledge Women's Initiative) in Bukedea were studied to obtain insights into how their organization to facilitate interaction of actors. The two IPs were selected based on their engagement in the production, processing and marketing of cassava. In addition, these two IPs were hypothesized to have differing organizational structures which could be influencing how the different actors were interacting. Data were collected by conducting two focus group discussions and eight key informant interviews from farmers (producers), processors and traders participating in the platforms. The study respondents were purposively selected based on their active involvement in IP activities. Thematic qualitative data analysis procedure (Silverman, 2006) was used to identify emerging themes and patterns/ trends, and attribute meaning to the data.

### **Findings**

Organizational structure is a critical element in the functioning of multi-stakeholder initiatives such as IPs because they influence actor interaction, coordination and knowledge sharing. For this study, group size, decision-making process and rules and regulations were conceptualized to be the key defining features of organizational structure that influenced actor interaction in the IPs.

#### ***Group size***

Group size is a critical determinant of the organizational structure of community IPs. As membership and therefore group size increases, it becomes increasingly difficult to pass

on information to the members, which consequently reduces interpersonal connection and commitment to the group. Although both SOSPPA and P'KWI restructured to form smaller groups at village levels, there was a difference in the level of decentralization between the two IPs. The P'KWI IP had a more organized and decentralized structure where members in one village were organized into semi-autonomous groups called sub-clusters. The sub-clusters were further sub-divided into smaller groups called economic groups comprising 25 members, and each economic group was composed of five smaller groups called clubs. The clubs were the smallest groups composed of five persons who were homogeneous, had shared beliefs and could easily share tacit knowledge. Members within the smaller groups had more social capital and could easily bond and bridge within and across different groups/networks due to enhanced information flow. The SOSPPA IP on the other hand was less decentralized and less organized, although members were also organized in smaller farmer field school (FFS) groups at parish level. Information flow was by word of mouth from the Executive Committee on top of the hierarchy to the group chair persons and vice versa. But because these FFS groups were relatively large (each on average was composed of 30-35 members), this sometimes led to break down of information especially to those members who were far away from their chair persons. As such, group cohesion and therefore commitment to the group reduced due to limited interaction among the members.

#### **Decision making process within the IPs**

Organizational structure will either aid or constrain the ability of the members to make effective decisions, which ultimately influences how actors interact and behave. The decision-making process in the P'KWI IP was more participatory than in the SOSPPA IP. In P'KWI, the sub-clusters at the village levels made decisions regarding membership subscription, volumes to be sold by each member, enterprise selection, and how to resolve minor conflicts. Any decisions which could not be handled at this level were then forwarded to the Annual General Meeting (AGM) for further discussion. The AGM was therefore the hub for decision-making where issues from the different sub-clusters were aggregated and decision taken. Key decisions like approval of overall work plans, budgets and accountabilities; consideration and approval of policies; and calling for constitutional amendments, were only discussed in the AGM. This participatory decision-making encouraged representation of all members' views in the prioritization of key issues affecting the operation of the IP thereby enhancing dialogue among members at all levels. Conversely, in SOSPPA all key decisions such as approval of work plans, budgets and audit reports, product price negotiation, volumes to be sold by each member, and conflict resolution were made by the Executive Committee. The final decision would then be communicated to other members in a meeting for their information. The lack of involvement of members at the bottom of the hierarchy in deciding key issues of the platform created a sense of dissatisfaction and agitation causing some of them to become less active or even withdraw their membership. This implies that when the decision making authority is concentrated at the top of the hierarchy, there is often a breakdown in information flow among members ultimately reducing where not all members are involved commitment to the platform

activities.

### **Rules and regulations within the IPs**

Besides group size and the decision-making process, rules and regulations also shape organizational structure and affect how actors behave and relate to each other. Both P’KWI and SOSPPA IPs had clearly stated rules but the difference was in the level of enforcement. In both IPs, every registered member was required to pay annual and membership subscription and had to market all produce through the platform at an agreed upon price. In P’KWI, all rules were strictly enforced at the sub-cluster level and anyone who defaulted would be either fined or suspended depending on the frequency and gravity of the offence. This made members to be more vigilant and committed to all platform activities. In SOSPPA however, there was laxity in enforcing rules especially at the lower levels which gave members the leeway to default and therefore behave contrary to the stated rules. For example because no punitive actions were taken against members who did not market their produce through the platform, some groups started finding their own market and negotiating prices without involving the Executive Committee. This lack of vigilance created situations of indifference among members affecting their interaction within the platform.

### **Conclusion**

Group size, the decision-making process and internal rules and regulations shape the structure of community IPs and which ultimately restricts or stimulates the way actors relate and share information. Smaller groups that are more homogeneous and can build shared beliefs tend to be more cohesive and easily share tacit knowledge as opposed to relatively large groups. A more participatory decision-making process encourages representation of all actors’ views in the prioritization of key issues affecting the operation of the IP thereby stimulating dialogue among members at all levels of the hierarchy. However, a less participatory decision-making process creates a feeling of disgruntlement among actors which lessens their interaction and information sharing. The fluidity of IP membership calls for establishment of rules and regulations that guide actor’s interaction and behavior on the platform. To be effective, the rules and regulations must be enforced without discrimination. Ensuring effective enforcement and therefore compliancy to the rules and regulations is an important factor in creating situations that promote actor vigilance and stimulate buildup of more interactive relationships.

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