**Brussels Policy Briefing no. 34**

*Farmer-driven research to improve food and nutrition security*

*14 November 2013, JDE 52 (Jacques Delors Building, 99, rue Belliard, 1040 Brussels, 5th floor)*
*http://brusselsbriefings.net*

---

### Lessons from joint learning exercise on innovation systems in African agriculture

*Anne Floquet – JOLISAA (Joint Learning in Innovation Systems in African Agriculture), Benin*

---

We, as researchers and decision makers in position to support innovation, have to change our views on farmers' innovation if smallholders' innovation processes are to be supported in ways that strengthen their capacity to adapt to changing environment. This is the main lesson that will be distilled in the presentation sharing some of the results of a research project conducted in parallel in West Africa (Benin), East Africa (Kenya) and Southern Africa (South Africa). This EU funded project was conducted by 9 different research organizations. A common analytical framework, together with an approach to include main stakeholders involved were developed and used by the research teams for comparative and participatory assessment of innovation processes in the research sites. More than 50 innovation cases were explored, of which 13 were subjected to an in-depth analysis and assessment. We could then question some of the preconceived ideas and assumptions on which many development agencies still build their decisions and interventions.

- The non-innovative producer
- The sole technological nature of innovation
- The restricted social field where innovation takes place
- The innovation process considered as technical dynamics that can be orchestrated

In fact, we could document a few endogenous innovation processes concerning large farming communities and natural resource or food systems, as well as many innovation processes that were initially started by a project but then went on a "life on their own" that strongly differed from what was initially planned and expected and not anymore orchestrated. Because most research and development projects are conducted over a few years only, research and development agencies lose sight on such innovation processes and therefore do no longer support them unless after a long period of time their scale and scope become large enough to make them an inescapable stake for development.
Innovation processes (when innovation is being out- and upscaled) display continuous sequences of technological and organizational innovations (and in some cases of institutional innovations) making change possible and sustainable. The phenomenon was qualified by the metaphor of a "bundle of innovations".

Research organizations have changed their way of conducting research and we could trace a significant number of collaborative and participatory research operations, with genuine joint learning among participants. However, when the innovation system concerned remained solely focused on the "researcher-producer "pair or the researcher-extensionist-producer triangle, scaling could not happen. Many other stakeholders have to be taken on board: those from the value chains concerned by the commodity involved, producers' organizations and intermediate enterprises improving smallholders' position in the value chain, and decision makers who have to be convinced of the relevance and potential outcomes of the processes. In some cases, researchers were therefore social engineers of public private partnerships. But they considered that they were entering an empty social and political field. In fact, outcomes of their attempts were different because of the real stakeholders' strategies. Even when processes displayed unexpected trajectories, and PPP were thought to be failures for example, other innovative processes occurred independently, which indicates the relevance of the commodity to smallholders and others actors.
In the end, wouldn't it be more efficient to support and enhance existing processes instead of trying to device "alternative innovative systems".

**For more information please contact**: Anne Floquet, anneb.floquet@gmail.com