

Guidelines for working with Local Innovation Support Facilities (LISFs) in the SULCI-FaNS (Scaling Up Local Capacity to Innovate for Food and Nutrition Security) project

Introduction

The Local Innovation Support Facility (LISF) is a mechanism to support local research and innovation led by small-scale farmers making use of funds and other forms of support that are meant to be managed at community level. The LISF is designed to help local innovators – women and men – to obtain relevant information, technical assistance or materials needed to carry out farmer-led research and innovation for improving local livelihoods and to share their results within and beyond the community. These guidelines are based on those developed by Prolinnova–Ghana during the Proli-FaNS (Promoting local innovation in Food and Nutrition Security) project in 2016–19. These – in turn – had been based on experiences in 2009–12 of Prolinnova–Ghana and four other Prolinnova Country Platforms (CPs) in Africa in the FAIR (Farmer Access to Innovation Resources) project implemented with funding initially from DURAS (Promoting Sustainable Development in Agricultural Research Systems) in France and subsequently by the Rockefeller Foundation in the USA. The original idea of an LISF was based on experiences made by Prolinnova–Nepal (see www.prolinnova.net/lisf for more information).

Background

In participatory research by farmers and scientists and/or technical advisors/“experts”, the scientists or experts tend to dominate in the interaction, as they often seek to explore their own questions and give little or no attention to the questions of the farmer innovators or community. In most cases, the outsiders want the farmers to test ideas or “solutions” coming from formal research or as part of a project intervention. Even when some competitive funds are available for participatory research (which is not always the case), these are generally managed or controlled by the scientists/external experts. The LISF seeks to change the power balance in decision-making about local agricultural research, so that the farmers and other community members are the ones who decide what will be researched, how and by whom.

Three central principles of LISFs are:

- Resources are made accessible directly to farmers or farmer groups for research and innovation, not via agricultural research/development agencies
- Resources are used exclusively for experimentation, innovation and learning by farmers
- Farmers and their organisations play a strong role in managing and allocating the LISF resources.

How the LISF operates

In each action-learning site for SULCI-FaNS, the multistakeholder platform (MSP) facilitates and mentors the setting up and operation of the LISF. It sets up a gender-inclusive LISF Management Committee at the action-learning site to decide on the use of the LISF. The Management Committee could be composed, for example, of farmer representatives (women, men, youth), traditional leaders,

representatives from local service providers (e.g. agriculture, water, health, education) and, as an *ex officio* member, the SULCI-FaNS coordinator at the learning-site or CP level. One or more members of the local MSP may be in this Management Committee. Another possibility is that a farmer organisation (FO) in the action-learning site takes on the role of managing the LISF. The local MSP builds the capacities of the Management Committee or FO to manage the LISF (see more details under “LISF management, monitoring and reporting” below).

The general procedure of operating an LISF is as follows:

- The LISF Management Committee, supported by the local MSP, identifies criteria for selecting farmers to receive support through the LISF.
- It makes an open call for proposals from farmers within the action-learning site.
- Farmers (individuals or groups) who want to submit proposals may be assisted by the LISF Management Committee in formulating them, especially in the case of farmers who cannot write
- Farmers (individuals or groups) submit their written or oral proposals for research, innovation and/or learning activities.
- The Management Committee uses its criteria to select applicants to be granted funds or other forms of support from the LISF.
- It makes the resources available to the grantees in cash or kind or another form of support requested by the farmers, e.g. laboratory tests.
- The grantees organise and lead the research or learning process, possibly in collaboration with researchers, technical advisors or other external expertise, if this was part of their proposal.
- The grantees share their results (the process and findings) within the community and, where possible, beyond it.

Within the SULCI-FaNS project, the local MSP will need to decide whether only farmers or farmer groups whose innovations have already been identified and documented for the project in the action-learning sites will be eligible to apply for LISF support, or whether the MSP wants to use an open call for local research proposals to encourage new innovators to identify themselves.

Possible criteria for selecting grantees

The criteria for screening the proposals will differ according to the decisions of the LISF Management Committee but – based on past experience – the criteria typically include some or many of the following:

- the idea comes from one or more local community members, not from outside sources
- the innovation on which the applicant proposes to work appears to be sound in economic, environmental and social terms
- the innovation appears to be feasible for small-scale farming households with limited resources, i.e. it does not need external inputs that are expensive or cannot easily be obtained locally
- the proposal is for local research and learning (not for investment by an individual or group)
- the applicant is willing to record progress and report to the community and share the innovation still more widely with others.

Specifically for LISFs within the SULCI-FaNS project, the following criteria should also be included:

- the innovation is being developed by a woman or women’s group or – if developed by a man or mixed-gender group – focuses on women’s activities and/or may be able to reduce gender disparities

- the innovation has potential to improve food and nutrition security of small-scale farming households.

Potential uses of the LISF

The farmers may apply for an LISF grant for one or more of the following purposes:

- organising learning or sharing visits to sources of new information (e.g. innovative farmers or communities, research centres)
- acquiring specific equipment or tools needed for carrying out farmer-led research and innovation, such as for measuring, record-keeping and documentation
- organising community-level events for sharing outcomes of local research with other farmers
- sharing innovations and farmer-led research and innovation experiences at fairs, exhibitions, farmer conferences, policy workshops etc
- training other farmers in working with the local innovations and/or in carrying out farmer-led research
- covering transport costs of scientists or technical advisors invited by the farmers to support their local research.

The farmers or farmer groups are expected to apply in person for support by filling in a simple application form with the assistance of field extension officers or literate farmer-group leaders.

LISF management, monitoring and reporting

The local MSP arranges that one of its members (e.g. the facilitating NGO in the action-learning site) or, if legally registered, an FO involved in LISF management, sets up a special bank account to receive funds from the CP host organisation for operating the LISF. The MSP gives guidance to the LISF Management Committee throughout the process of developing the locally relevant criteria for selecting grantees and in agreeing on how to record and report on use of the LISF and how to monitor and evaluate the results of the supported activities.

It assists the LISF Management Committee in designing simple forms for LISF application, processing of applications, disbursement of resources to grantees, and reporting on the process and results. The focal point for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of the SULCI-FaNS project at the action-learning site works closely with the LISF Management Committee to mentor it in M&E of the LISF.

The LISF Management Committee is responsible for quarterly narrative and financial reporting on the LISF to the host organisation of the CP as well as to the local community. LISF Management Committee members and grantees are also expected to share information about the outcomes of LISF-supported activities and experiences in managing the LISF at project review and planning workshops and public events in the community and beyond.

For the sustainability of this mechanism to support farmer-led research, innovation and learning, the LISF Management Committees, the local MSPs, the CP coordinator and the National Steering Committee in each country will seek ways to generate resources that can be made available for LISFs in the future, i.e. after the end of the SULCI-FaNS project. They will draw on experiences from other CPs that have tried to sustain their LISFs through the creation of revolving funds, linking up to national or decentralised innovation funds, developing community social enterprises to generate funds etc.