

PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia 2011 summary annual report

1. Introduction

In 2011, PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia (PE) planned to continue executing the FAIR (Farmer Access to Innovation Resources) project and more activities. The key activities planned were: organising a regional workshop to enhance learning among key FAIR project partners, providing a refresher training on monitoring and evaluation (M&E) to people involved in the three project sites, providing thematic training on natural crop protection measures and management of botanicals, disbursing funds to FAIR project implementers in the three sites (Ambo, Amaro, Axum), documentation of the FAIR project through producing a synthesis report and field-guide booklets and organizing a policy-dialogue forum. This brief report outlines the key performances of PE in 2011. Some are reported in relation to the planned activities, while some activities reported are not planned but were found to be important during the course of the year.

2. Key achievements

2.1 Regional learning and sharing workshop

A regional workshop (region refers here to provincial-level meetings) aimed at institutionalising participatory innovation development (PID) was held 14–15 January, 2011 in Axum, northern Ethiopia, where one of the Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs) is being piloted under the FAIR project of PE. Proceedings of this workshop and another similar workshop held in Ambo in 2010 were combined to produce a single document because the contents were similar although the sites and local participants were different. Among other things, this workshop was very instrumental in creating a space for talking about the extent that the work of PE is compatible with that of the Farmer Research Groups (FRGs) of the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR) and the Farmer Innovation Fund (FIF) of the Federal Ministry of Agriculture (MoA). The fact that EIAR and MoA are the closest PE partners and also “targets” for policy influence, this workshop provided PE a window of opportunity to improve linkages. Both agencies agreed to work toward greater collaboration, for which the PE Working Group (PEWG) has to take the initiative.

2.2 National sharing and learning workshop

According to the original plan, the workshop was to be organised together with the FRG project of EIAR and the FIF project of the MoA. However, this was not possible because these partners did not find the timing appropriate. The workshop was then turned into more of a “home affair”, in which some important papers based on the PE activities were presented. This workshop went over two days, and donors were invited to come only at the end of the second day for a two-hour meeting; the short duration was meant to encourage many donors to come to the meeting. The learning process went very well among the PE “family” members, but few donors showed up for the meeting, although over ten donor organisations had confirmed. Danish Church Aid (DCA) and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) were the two donors who showed up in the meeting and

who also expressed interest to work with PE. DCA was interested to be part of the media work to promote local innovation in the country, while JICA showed interest to work on the institutionalisation of PID in the FRG project, for which the PE has to prepare a new project proposal. One of the important achievements of this workshop was the discussion made on the new directions of PE. The PE family members reached the understanding that PE has to align its project preparation, networking and linkage efforts accordingly (see “New strategic directions of PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia”).

2.3 Enhancing innovator-scientist linkages

The innovative farmer who managed to shorten the dormancy period of the *Podocarpus* tree was linked with a university professor who is an expert in the area. Legesse Negash, a scientist from Addis Ababa University, continued to advise and work with Jiffara, who is an innovative farmer from Ambo. Jiffara, with the advice of the professor, is experimenting in different soil types to further reduce the dormancy period of *Podocarpus*. This is a typical example of a PID case in Ethiopia. It is important to continue following up on this work, through linking Jiffara with more actors (for example, a professional association of foresters or any other project of wider application) not only to improve the results but also to accelerate the process of knowledge-sharing at national level.

2.4 Documentation

The third local innovation catalogue was printed and about 700 copies have been distributed to various NGOs and government organizations. Cost of printing services is rising, but still this activity has to remain one of the important tasks of PE, as it plays a significant role in promoting the work of the network. Other documents produced during the year included the combined proceedings of the Ambo and Axum workshop, a paper on institutionalisation of PID, the draft report on the FAIR impact assessment and the draft country synthesis report on FAIR.

2.5 Fund transfer

Before the end of the year, funds were transferred to the three sites of the FAIR project, as the Axum and Ambo farmer innovator groups expressed great interest to visit the Alemberhan Community-Based Institution (CBI) in East Gojam in Amhara Region. This CBI was established with the support of AgriService Ethiopia (PE Secretariat), which worked in the district from 2001 to 2010. Alemberhan CBI is now a farmer-managed institution (similar to the Amaro CBI which is participating in the FAIR project), but with more developed organisational systems, such as running income-generation schemes, having a secretariat made up of professionals, fostering strong linkages with extension and research organisations, running a Community Learning Forum (CoLF) and administrating a Community Innovation and Development Fund (CIDF).

Farmers and experts from the three sites (among others, the Vice-President of Axum University was present) made the trip to Alemberhan. The visit was very inspiring. The participants witnessed that institutions like the Alemberhan CBI – which are different from NGOs, cooperatives and the elite-captured local development associations – may serve as a model of a farmer-managed self-help and development organisation that is appropriate to manage activities in promoting local innovation. Both the Axum and Ambo farmers have already started some activities to set up their own CBIs and some of the government officials from Axum and Ambo, who also joined the trip, have expressed their commitment to support the farmers in this process. A report on the visit, with photos, will be soon be available on the PE page of the PROLINNOVA website.

2.6 Monitoring and backstopping support

Though not as much as it was planned, the PE coordinator made monitoring visits to the FAIR sites. More importantly, PEWG members and the backstopper (Ann Waters-Bayer) visited the Ambo site and saw that there was still very high enthusiasm from the side of both farmers and Ambo University staff to continue engaging in FAIR, but the organisational support from the local NGO Ethiopian Rural Self-Help Association (ERSHA) as well as the PE Secretariat was not adequate. ERSHA, a member of PE, channels the funds to the farmers and provides some technical support. Unfortunately, in mid-2011 upon completion of a donor-supported project, ERSHA stopped working in area where the LISF is being piloted. This created a gap, as no staff remained at the pilot site. The good news is ERSHA has come back to Ambo with the support of another donor and the farmers involved in piloting the LISF began to receive the usual support from ERSHA.

During visit to Ambo, the PEWG members also realised that there had been some misunderstanding on contract management between the PE coordinator and the university staff members who had the task of M&E of FAIR in Ambo. They had an exhaustive discussion with the Ambo University staff members concerned and reached agreement not only to resolve this challenge but also to open up new possibilities of working together in the future. The PEWG members and the backstopper also visited some institutions in Addis. The visit made to the Netherlands Embassy was worth mentioning in this regard. Gerrit Noordam, a policy advisor at the Embassy, expressed great interest on the work of PROLINNOVA. Although no concrete funding opportunity came out from this visit, the PEWG realises that a continued engagement with the Embassy is necessary to transform this contact into project linkages and assistance in policy lobbying.

2.7 Impact assessment

The members of the PEWG spent considerable unpaid time carrying out the impact assessment of the FAIR project. This is a very good example of voluntary action to sustain the network, and PE needs to cultivate this culture of voluntary work over an extended period of time. The impact assessment report will be uploaded in the PROLINNOVA website and a considerable part of it will be used to finalise the synthesis report as well as feeding into the upcoming FAIR transition project.

2.8 Reforms within PE

Two major reforms have taken place in PE in 2011. The first one was that the PE (also explained in the paper on new strategic directions) decided to change the regional platforms in Ethiopia, which had been based on agro-ecological systems, into more localised project-based multi-stakeholder platforms that may grow into a regional (provincial) platform over time. Forming the broad regional platforms without putting in enough funds to carry out PROLINNOVA activities had created high expectations that could not be fulfilled with the limited financial capacity of PE. Therefore, although the PE had tried for the past many years to make those platforms function, most of them did not undertake any meaningful task, except some work in Jimma (the coffee-based innovation platform). The Axum subplatform was an exception, as it is still functional and the enthusiasm is even growing. The PE has learned from the Axum subplatform that a project-based multi-stakeholder platform is necessary to create more commitment and interest in the cause of PROLINNOVA. The PE is fully aware of the fact that project-based platforms are in danger of disappearing when the project funds come to an end. However, PE is also convinced that, if such networks are strongly supported by the strategy of institutionalising the approach within the daily routines of the member organisations and

if the PE continues to work at the same sites whenever new project funds become available (instead of opening up a new site), this approach is more promising to sustain the platforms. More projects will create more platforms, and some of them could grow organically into important regional platforms based on agro-ecological systems.

The second institutional change refers to the substitution of the national coordinator (a full-time employed expert) by a junior communication officer who will be responsible for information sharing, documentation, project finance management and other administrative tasks. The technical work of PE, such as writing project proposals/fundraising, running training courses, organising advocacy meetings, M&E, research, organising learning and sharing workshops, producing workshop proceedings and writing reports will be tasks that are divided among the members of the PEWG. This is important not only to cope up with the reduction in external funding but also to create more chances for the PEWG members to interact in the PE processes instead of acting as a board of management. This strategic shift became necessary after the resignation of the PE coordinator, which created some gap in PE activities for some time in 2011. This model of managing the network has tremendous advantages, but the risks come when the PEWG members are not in a position to meet their responsibilities. This could cause the network to collapse or may create a heavy workload on the host institution, which may not be tolerable over a long period. The other challenge is when the PE is fortunate enough to manage many projects that demand time more than what the PEWG members can allocate to them. However, there is an understanding within the PEWG members someone could be hired on project-based agreements if they feel the work is too much for them to handle.

3. Conclusion and outlook

The work of PE seems to decrease following the withdrawal of the Dutch funding, but PE is also optimistic that the funding challenges will drive the network into a more innovative engagement to sustain the network and to achieve its goals. The upcoming FAIR-related activities (FAIR 2 extension and FAIR 3 transition) will help to keep up momentum, but the PE secretariat needs to explore more funding opportunities, including already known ones. The relationship started with the FRG project is showing some promising results. PE needs to capitalise on this and develop a proposal for possible funding from JICA. The PE also has to follow up on the funding promises of DCA for media work. That will help to make the network better known in Ethiopia, which may open up still more funding opportunities.