

Multi-level joint learning about locally managed innovation funds

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Abstract

PROLINNOVA (**PR**oMoting **L**ocal **I**NNOVation) partners in eight countries in Africa and Asia facilitated a farmer-managed process of allocating “Local Innovation Support Funds” (LISFs) for locally relevant experimentation and innovation. The LISF is a new institutional arrangement for joint learning by farmers and other key actors in agricultural research and development (ARD). It gives smallholders – men and women – the means to design, implement and evaluate their own processes of exploration. It supports decentralised farmer-led experiments and sharing of findings, both from farmer to farmer and through formal extension channels. The local management committees for LISFs involve in some cases only farmers, in most cases also other ARD actors. They are linked with a national PROLINNOVA platform of actors from state and non-state organisations who seek to integrate farmer-led participatory research and extension, based on local innovation, into mainstream research, development and education. The work with decentralised LISFs was designed to achieve this institutionalisation from the bottom up. This paper focuses on how piloting LISFs led to social learning through joint monitoring and reflection: i) learning by the multiple stakeholders involved at local level (including local government) about how to manage LISFs to promote local innovation; and ii) learning by other ARD actors at higher levels in institutions of research, development and education about how to support local innovation processes.

1 Introduction

This paper presents an empirical case of collaborative knowledge generation for rural development in the form of: i) farmer-led experimentation combining local and external knowledge; and ii) action research to explore an approach to funding this knowledge generation. Multistakeholder teams in eight African and Asian countries piloted and assessed local funds that gave smallholder farmers the opportunity to decide on their own ARD activities. The piloting was designed for learning among the men and women farmers, development practitioners, scientists and local government authorities involved. The real-life experiment with an alternative funding mechanism was to show how institutional change (here, change in governance of research funds) could create space for farmers to lead the joint development of site-appropriate innovations. Social learning was at the heart of this experiment: learning by multiple stakeholders about how the funding mechanism can best function, drawing on the knowledge and experience of the farmers and other ARD actors in governing the fund and in prioritising and assessing activities supported by it.

The idea arose out of learning in the international PROLINNOVA (**PR**oMoting **L**ocal **I**NNOVation in ecologically oriented agricultural and natural resource management) network of 20 multistakeholder Country Platforms (CPs): people from civil society organisations and research, extension and education institutions seeking to scale up participatory research and extension. They had observed that, after learning to identify local innovations, extensionists tended to promote the innovations instead of the approach of encouraging farmers to collaborate with other ARD actors in “Participatory Innovation Development” (PID), and scientists wanted to “validate” the innovations instead of helping farmers find answers to their own questions (Wettasinha *et al* 2008). Farmers still had little or no say in the “participatory” research. PROLINNOVA partners hypothesised that the power balance would change if farmers had more control over funds for ARD. They decided to pilot a mechanism through which smallholders would directly access funds for innovation, decide what would be explored, how and by whom, implement and evaluate experiments, and share the findings.

Drawing lessons from similar approaches, e.g. in Colombia (Ashby *et al* 2000), the PROLINNOVA International Support Team (IST) developed the idea of “Local Innovation Support Funds” (Veldhuizen *et al* 2005, Waters-Bayer *et al* 2005). The French-funded DURAS (Promoting Sustainable Development in Agricultural Research Systems) programme supported initial piloting in four countries in 2006–08. Support from the Netherlands Directorate General for International Cooperation (DGIS) and Rockefeller Foundation (RF) allowed expansion to eight countries (Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, Tanzania, South Africa, Uganda) to do more systematic action research in 2009–11. RF supported a “transition year” focused on upscaling LISFs in 2012.

2 The actors involved and their roles

At 3–10 sites (usually districts) in each country, an NGO partner in the CP helped local people set up a Fund Management Committee (FMC) of 5–10 members. Each CP made its own decisions about the type of people to be involved, and the NGO partner used its network to find interested people to serve in the FMC. The FMC made calls for proposals from farmers, screened the proposals, selected the grantees, oversaw the distribution of resources in cash or kind, and monitored and evaluated the work supported by the LISF. In Ethiopia and Uganda, the FMCs included only farmers (men and women), advised by a local multistakeholder group comprising NGO and government extension staff and staff from a nearby college or university. This advisory group became a “district learning platform”. In most countries, extensionists were members of the FMCs and, in Kenya and Ghana, also scientists. However, farmers had the say in how the funds were used, selected topics and questions of local priority, identified the type of support they wanted (if any) from external specialists, and decided how to share their findings within the community and beyond.

At national level, a multistakeholder core group in the PROLINNOVA CP (state and non-state actors) was responsible for coordinating, monitoring, evaluating and documenting the action-research process, outcomes and impacts. To build the capacity of FMC members and the staff of local support organisations to handle the LISF process, the core group gave an introductory training at local level, followed by periodic reflection meetings and annual workshops to discuss issues arising during the piloting. It helped the farmers identify other actors (e.g. technical specialists, scientists, private sector, including banks) who could support farmers’ efforts to improve their farming systems. The core group also brought together a wider group of CP members as a “national learning platform” to reflect on the LISF piloting experiences and to draw lessons. The core group linked the FMCs and the district learning platforms to this wider national learning platform, including policymakers in government agencies. This was a strategy for institutionalisation: when learning about LISF piloting, the stakeholders were encouraged to think about changes needed within their institutions to allow the approach to be applied more widely. The various structures involved in managing the LISFs and the different levels of learning within a country are shown in Figure 1.

The IST composed of staff members (agronomists and sociologists) from two NGOs – ETC Foundation in the Netherlands and the International Institute for Rural Reconstruction (IIRR) in the Philippines – coordinated method development, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), inter-country exchange and learning, comparative analysis, documentation and international policy dialogue.

A French scientist worked with two CPs (in Cambodia and Ethiopia) to develop guidelines for participatory impact assessment (PIA) at community and higher institutional level (Triomphe *et al* 2012) that were then applied by all CPs. The PIAs were conducted in late 2010 by national core-group members or consultants together with FMC leaders. The PIA guidelines were structured around four areas of possible impact: i) development of improved land-husbandry practices and systems; ii) spread of these practices and systems among farmers and effects on their livelihoods; iii) changes in capacities of farmers and other land-users to access relevant information and develop technical and socio-organisations innovations; and iv) changes in terms of openness and interest of ARD agencies to support and work with local innovators and their groups. The PIA methodology included: i) semistructured interviews and focus-group discussions with LISF grantees, non-grantees, FMCs, local authorities, agricultural officers and support organisations directly involved in PROLINNOVA; ii) case stories of most significant change; and iii) multistakeholder workshops at district and national level for sharing and learning from the results of the PIA.

3 Setting up and implementing the LISFs and local experimentation

In each country, the core team made an exploratory study to learn from any similar initiatives in the country and to decide how best to design the LISF and where to pilot it. Each CP developed and tested an LISF model that fitted its country-specific political and institutional realities. However, the pilots in all countries followed key principles defined jointly by the CPs: i) funds are made accessible directly to farmers or their groups; ii) grants are used for innovation, experimentation and learning by farmers; and iii) farmers and their organisations play a strong role in deciding on fund allocation.

Based on lessons drawn by the IST from reviewing experiences with similar approaches (Veldhuizen *et al* 2005) and guided by the IST and an organisational-development advisor from South Africa, the national teams developed guidelines for managing the funds and helped the FMCs agree on criteria for selecting grantees. In view of the key LISF principles and the common values driving the PROLINNOVA network, the main criteria for screening the proposals were similar in all eight countries:

- the idea was driven by the farmer applicants (not by outsiders)
- the innovation to be explored appeared sound in economic, environmental and social terms
- the innovation could be used by poor farmers (with locally available, low-cost inputs)
- the support through the LISF could add value to the innovation
- the applicants were willing to share their results
- the proposal was for local experimentation and learning, not farm investment.

The FMC, supported by the district advisory-cum-learning group, organised calls for proposals and helped farmers to understand the eligibility criteria and to write proposals of 1–2 pages with a simple budget, sometimes writing down oral applications from illiterate farmers (e.g. women). After the FMC vetted the proposals according to the agreed criteria, selected farmers (individuals or groups) were allocated resources for the proposed activities. The FMCs also gave grants for farmer-defined training (e.g. by local innovators) or study visits (e.g. to local innovators or other learning sites). They supervised whether the activities were done according to the grant agreements. The FMCs and district advisory group organised field days or innovation fairs and used rural radio and – in Cambodia – a farmer magazine to share the farmer experimenters' findings and to motivate more farmers to apply for the next call.

LISF grants were less than €100 on average, ranging from €5 in Nepal to €1670 in South Africa. The smaller grants were used mainly to buy tools and equipment to improve a local innovation or to buy inputs, e.g. seeds, record books. The grants were larger if costs of external services were included, e.g. laboratory analysis or involvement of research staff (especially in South Africa).

4 Facilitating learning at different levels

Members of the national teams that coordinated the piloting in the eight countries stimulated reflection and learning on different levels in their respective countries.

- **Community level:** The local people involved in LISF piloting – the FMCs, experimenting farmers and wider community – learned by doing. In addition to learning from the experiments, they learned how to assess the relevance of proposed research for the community, manage innovation funds and lead joint innovation activities with outsiders. A national core-group member joined one or more of the first FMC meetings and later, during periodic M&E visits, supported further learning, mainly by asking questions to the FMC based on the M&E tool used by all eight CPs (see below). Most of the learning at community level happened during the process of making repeated rounds of calling for proposals, selecting grantees, monitoring how the funds were used and assessing what this contributed to the community – in informal reflections and discussions and during visits of district advisory group members.
- **District level:** The district learning platform of ARD government staff, administration and NGOs advising the FMCs learned through training by the national core team, their own mentoring of the FMCs and experimenting farmers, making M&E visits and co-organising innovation fairs. These activities made them

more aware of the roles of different actors (including farmers and themselves) in innovation systems, gave them deeper insight into local priorities, and – through learning by doing – increased their capacity to facilitate and support farmer-led innovation processes.

- **National level:** National CP multistakeholder platform members learned primarily through M&E visits to FMCs and farmer experimenters and in national-level core-group meetings and wider sharing-and-learning workshops for discussing the piloting process, the M&E results and the PIA findings. The meetings and workshops offered opportunities to reflect on how the LISFs worked, how farmer-led innovation can be enhanced, the roles of formal research and development actors in supporting this, and how an LISF approach could be mainstreamed. The core groups in each country used a common M&E tool (“register”) developed by the IST to monitor 22 jointly identified indicators of how the LISF was functioning. This allowed them to adjust LISF arrangements during the piloting but also generated information comparable across all eight CPs, despite the differences in the country-specific designs. Many of indicators were of a strategic nature (e.g. transaction time and cost issues). They were also discussed at M&E sessions at community level. The CP used the examples of functioning LISFs as evidence to convince ARD policymakers that farmer-managed funds for farmer-led experimentation are feasible and effective in stimulating innovation relevant for smallholders.

At **international level**, the IST facilitated learning among the piloting and other CPs in the network by holding electronic and phone conferences to discuss progress, encouraging direct email exchange between the CPs, using backstopping visits as moments for reflection, supporting process documentation, arranging “writeshops” for comparative analysis of the process and outcomes, and – for the wider PROLINNOVA network – organising sessions on LISFs during the annual International Partners Workshops. The CPs and the IST could thus learn about ways to improve the funding mechanism and to scale it up in the piloting countries as well as encourage LISF piloting in other countries (PROLINNOVA 2012).

5 Impact

The focus here is not primarily in showing how innovations in agricultural practice are generated and shared but rather on how piloting a new way of funding the innovation and sharing process generated learning and influenced relationships among the actors involved (farmers, extensionists, scientists, local administration etc). The sharing, reflection and analysis were designed to lead to better mutual understanding among the various actors and to change how they see each other. The effectiveness and efficiency of the LISFs and their outcomes in terms of improved farming practices and livelihoods are discussed in PROLINNOVA (2012) and Macoolo *et al* (2013). This paper focuses on the impact in terms of social learning: learning by all involved about how to manage LISFs to promote local innovation, learning at community level about how to enhance local innovation processes, and learning by other ARD actors about how to support these processes.

The following is derived from the synthesis report on the piloting in the eight countries. Each CP made its own analysis, based on the data in the “register”, notes from the M&E visits and reports from district and national meetings. These interim and final analyses were shared and compared at the annual international workshops. The IST compiled the lessons and conclusions from the final country reports and international workshop, made a deeper analysis of M&E results across all countries, discussed these by email with the core teams in the eight CPs and produced the international synthesis report (PROLINNOVA 2012).

5.1 Enhanced capacity to manage funds for local innovation

Depending on the existing ARD institutional framework, the strength of farmer organisation and the capacities of and choices made by the different CPs, the eight piloting CPs came up with essentially two models for managing the LISFs:

- 1) *More centralised multistakeholder groups* at district or national level comprising state and non-state ARD actors (research, development, education) and some farmer leaders, allowing more opportunities for mutual learning between farmers and other actors, stricter screening of proposals, approval of fewer but

larger grants, and relatively high costs of the staff involved; it required more time for decision-making and led to less local capacity strengthening and less farmer influence in vetting proposals;

- 2) *More decentralised FMCs with mainly or only farmers*, usually in community-based organisations (CBOs), assisted by NGO and government staff in organising the process. Smallholders could access these funds more easily: the number of applications received and approved tended to be higher. Grants were usually smaller, often covering only the direct costs of experiments or travel by farmers to gain information; little was spent to bring in other experts to support the farmers' work. The operational costs of these FMCs were lower than in Model 1; the costs of strengthening CBO capacity were higher.

Local preferences in use of innovation funds were reflected in the allocation decisions. In order of frequency most funds went to: i) Small-scale experimentation and/or data collection by farmers only, individually or with other farmers; ii) Improving local innovations with little or no systematic experimentation or data collection; iii) Farmer-led experimentation together with research and/or extension staff using more systematic methods and data collection, covering some costs of the support agents; and iv) Learning and sharing by farmers through training by farmer innovators, farmer-led documentation and visits by farmers to other farmers or researchers to learn about local innovations and possibilities to improve them.

Initially, proposals approved by the decentralised FMCs were mainly related to farmer experimentation without outside actors. After 1–2 grant cycles, as farmers realised that the LISF differed from conventional farm investment funds, the level of complexity of experiments and involvement of other actors increased. Some farmers in Ghana and Kenya started paying travel costs and allowances to government staff providing technical advice, indicating a change in mindset on both sides.

LISFs worked well under decentralised management by farmers when supporting organisations had the experience and skills to build local management capacities. Analysis of LISF documents in a systematic review by Wageningen University on the effectiveness of innovation grants to smallholders found strong evidence that farmers' participation in governing the funds made the activities supported by the grants more in line with farmers' priorities (Ton *et al* 2013). Some men and women farmers who were involved in handling LISFs or leading the experiments were invited by local officials to join other meetings to discuss and prioritise development and could play a self-confident and informed role in influencing decisions in such public fora involving research and extension staff.

5.2 Enhanced capacity of farming communities to innovate

Several changes at community level became apparent. Farmers appreciated that the LISFs gave them the means to design, implement and evaluate their own research. They said the grantees and other farmers learned from the results of the funded activities and achieved higher farm productivity, savings on output costs and higher incomes. FMC members, grantees and non-grantees said their involvement in the LISF increased their capacity to access relevant information about agriculture, especially but not only from other farmers. They reported more sharing on local innovation among farmers in the community and with outsiders. The FMC members and grantees said the greater recognition of local innovation by community members and outsiders encouraged them to try new things and increased their self-confidence to interact with people from government services in jointly exploring new ways to improve farming. They felt they could better express their research interests and extension needs to these people.

According to the PIAs, the LISFs stimulated and strengthened farmers' capacity to experiment. It reduced some of the risk involved in trying new things. Farmers learned how to compare different options in a more systematic way. The grantees' successes encouraged other farmers to test new techniques. Some non-grantees started doing their own experiments without external funding.

Farmers in the FMCs observed increased self-organisation around managing local research and development and the funds for this. They felt their capacities were improved in organisational management, leadership, planning, M&E and keeping records. Farmers in FMCs in South Africa said they could think more in terms of

innovation, critically assess interventions and make informed decisions on whether to participate in externally initiated projects.

5.3 Greater interest of ARD actors to support farmer-led PID

According to farmers and other ARD actors in separate focus-group discussions during the PIAs, the LISF approach forged new links between farmers, extensionists and scientists and increased the contribution of farmers' knowledge to innovation processes. It stimulated the interest of other ARD actors to identify and support farmer innovation. A few scientists visited and advised farmer innovators and replicated their experiments on station. Extensionists organised field days to discuss local innovations and experiments. In Cambodia, two-thirds of the partners (Departments of Agriculture, NGOs, universities) felt they had greatly improved their capacities to collaborate with each other and with farmers.

Relatively few people in the support agencies were directly involved in working with communities managing LISFs. Linking the district advisory-cum-learning platforms with other stakeholders in the country through field visits, workshops and innovation fairs was particularly valuable in broadening awareness about local innovation and LISFs. According to a case study by an Ethiopian student in the Axum area, involving field agents in piloting LISFs led to greater awareness of local innovation and closer collaboration with farmers. This contributed to institutionalising farmer-led joint research at district level in the extension service and making higher levels aware of the potential of PID (Fanos *et al* 2011). Overall, Wageningen University's analysis of LISFs found "moderate" supporting evidence that these improved the relationship between farmers and technicians/researchers (Ton *et al* 2013).

6 Challenges

Several challenges were encountered during the LISF piloting, only some of which could be dealt with through the process of joint learning thus far.

6.1 Reaching a common understanding of the LISF concept

All actors involved in LISF piloting, not only farmers, needed time to appreciate that the LISF should generate and spread new knowledge and practices rather than cover costs of farm inputs for technology adoption. This differed from investment funds designed to generate private goods to benefit individuals. The LISF generates public goods for the community: the new knowledge and practices developed with its support should benefit not only the grantees but also other farmers. To make the difference clear, the core teams facilitated a process of developing transparent criteria and procedures for selecting grantees, reflecting critically on what the grantees did with the funds and who benefited, and encouraging the sharing of results.

6.2 Increasing the involvement of scientists

Especially where the FMCs were composed mainly or only of farmers, it proved difficult to involve scientists in the farmer-led experimentation. The farmers initially wanted to try things on their own, using local ideas and advice, while the research institutes had their own agenda and little flexibility to support farmers' initiatives. One exception was in Kenya, where the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute co-coordinates the CP (together with the NGO World Neighbors) and assumed responsibilities to handle the M&E of LISF piloting and to link farmer experimenters with scientists. In all countries, however, the LISFs generated interest from extension agents to become more involved in farmer-led experimentation, insofar as their institutions allowed this.

6.3 Scaling out and up

This refers to the double challenge of: i) scaling out the findings from the LISF-supported activities; and ii) scaling out and up the LISF approach itself in the stakeholder institutions – including farmer organisations. The PIAs revealed limited sharing of the results of farmers' experiments. Some CPs supported farmer-led documentation with photos and videos to share farmers' findings, but generally the documents were not used systematically. Communication with other farmers took place mainly through informal exchange, during innovation fairs and when district advisory groups brought other farmers and extensionists to visit the FMCs

and farmer experimenters and to learn about the LISF process and outcomes. At national level, the annual sharing-and-learning workshops of the organisations involved were relatively small and documentation about them was not widely disseminated.

Somewhat wider awareness of farmer innovation, partly resulting from LISF support, was achieved in May 2013, when four of the eight CPs involved in LISF piloting brought ten innovators each to exhibit at the Eastern African Farmer Innovation Fair (EAFIF) in Nairobi. However, the news coverage of this event was limited to Kenya, and visitors came mainly from Nairobi. Opening the international workshop on Agricultural Innovation Systems in Africa (AISA) in the midst of the EAFIF exposed the *ca* 100 participants in the AISA workshop from Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America to the achievements of the farmer innovators (see <http://aisa2013.wikispaces.com/ais+workshop>). However, the EAFIF provided little information about LISFs and processes of farmer-led research; it focused rather on farmers' innovations.

If the LISF is to become a funding mechanism that reaches millions of smallholders, it needs to be integrated into institutions in each country. During the piloting, it proved difficult to generate in-country resources for the LISF. In 2010 in Tanzania, the local government in one district contributed €7000 to the LISF work; this was the first but, thus far, only example of financial support from local government across all countries. Extensionists and a few researchers took part in implementing the pilots and thus contributed through staff time, but the institutional basis for this was weak, as support to LISF-related work was not formally approved at higher levels.

In 2012, the national teams explored several strategies to scale up LISFs. These included: integration into the Ministry of Agriculture extension department, the local government administration (especially in countries with decentralisation to county or district level) or research and development projects of CP partners; or setting up a Local Innovation Support Facility in a national farmer organisation; or basing the LISF in self-managed and self-resourced CBOs (Veldhuizen & Waters-Bayer 2013). The main challenges in these upscaling scenarios – except possibly the last two – would be to retain their smallholder focus and farmer-led character, and to retain an approach of continued reflection, learning and flexible adaptation to changing institutional conditions.

7 Lessons learnt from the piloting process

The experiences made during LISF piloting provided lessons for scaling up:

- ***Smallholders can and should be in the driving seat for locally relevant innovation development.*** The piloting showed that funds for local experimentation can be managed at the grassroots, if support agencies facilitate interaction between farmers and other stakeholders so that farmers remain in the driving seat and stimulate reflective learning so that the LISF can be adapted to the local institutional conditions. The LISF seems to be a promising mechanism for low-cost decentralised farmer-led research.
- ***Developing LISFs takes time and resources.*** LISFs have to be tailor-made for each setting. The core principles – giving smallholders direct access to funds, supporting farmer-led innovation, and farmer co-management of funds – must be applied according to local realities regarding farmer organisational capacities, availability of supporting ARD actors, and the existing policy and legal framework in the country. By building on lessons gained elsewhere with LISFs, the start-up period for new LISFs can be shortened, but time will still be needed for testing, learning and adjusting the LISFs in the new areas. Start-up costs need to be seen as an investment in de-learning old ways and learning new ways to structure relationships between actors in the innovation system.
- ***Constant efforts are needed to prevent scientists from “taking over”:*** Many cases of grantees' own experimentation, with little outside support, yielded results that were easily understood and applied by their neighbours. This initial experimentation by farmers on their own helped build their confidence to engage with other ARD actors. Joint experimentation by farmers and other ARD actors (PID) may generate results that can be scaled up with greater certainty that the innovation is “valid”, but is more costly than experimentation by only farmers. PID provides more opportunity for scientific knowledge to be integrated

by farmers, but there is a danger that the scientists “hijack” the process, as happened in some cases. Therefore, the interaction in PID must be well facilitated, so that the scientists appreciate that farmers have own questions they want to pursue in the joint research. The greater the farmers’ influence in deciding on fund use, the stronger their position in negotiating questions to explore. Where a balanced partnership can be achieved, the methods of externally supported local research can be more rigorous and the results better documented than when farmers experiment on their own.

8 Conclusions

Creating a farmer-managed funding mechanism can gradually open the way to a collaborative innovation process. Setting up the LISF by encouraging the farmers and other local stakeholders to design the mechanism to suit their conditions and then to reflect on how it works helps to link farmers and other ARD actors in joint learning driven by the interests of the farmers. The piloting of LISFs showed the potential of giving farmers direct access to resources for innovation. This can complement conventional funding for agricultural research and can also be regarded as an alternative approach to extension. The LISF has allowed farmer-led (joint) experimentation and sharing of findings, both from farmer to farmer and through formal extension channels. The accompanying training and mentoring by the support organisations (NGOs, research and extension) built farmers’ capacity to manage public funds at local level and also stimulated a better understanding of the support organisations’ own roles within innovation processes. By making innovation funds more readily available to smallholder farmers, the LISF piloting has shown a path toward strengthening their voices in governing publicly funded research and extension and making agricultural support services more accountable to, and relevant for, smallholders.

To advance smallholder farming, national policymakers should support farmer-managed decentralised funding mechanisms to link farmer innovators and other ARD actors. This gives farmers more opportunity to learn together with other knowledge-holders, to contribute their own knowledge in agricultural innovation processes and to benefit from outside knowledge. Rather than homogenising one LISF approach for smallholder farmers, donor and ARD agencies should promote a multitude of local learning platforms to develop locally appropriate forms of LISFs as well as other options that give smallholder farmers more say in managing ARD funds – and should create spaces to learn from this diversity in innovation.

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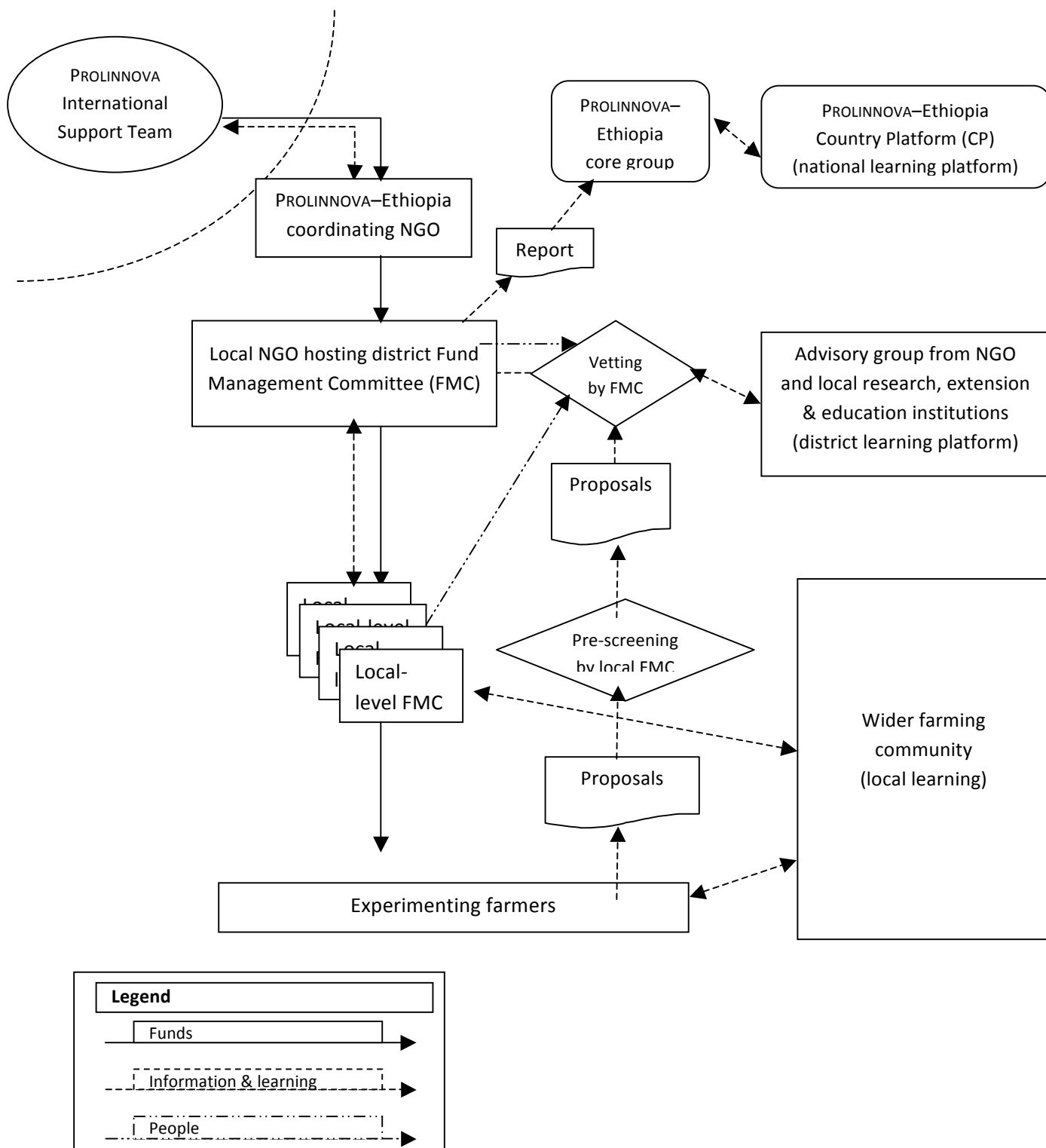


Figure 1: Structure, lines of decision-making and

levels of learning in piloting LISF:

example from PROLINNOVA-Ethiopia (after Hailu *et al* 2011)