

Prolinnova holds its 2020 African Partners Workshop via Zoom

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Introduction

The Prolinnova African Partners Workshop (AfPW) was held virtually for three days on 26–28 October 2020. This regional workshop, which is normally held every second year, had originally been scheduled to take place face-to-face in Yaoundé, Cameroon, back-to-back with the annual partners meeting for the SULCI-FaNS project and a Cameroonian Farmer Innovation Fair (FIF). However, because of global travel restrictions following the World Health Organization's declaration of Covid-19 as a pandemic, a decision was made to postpone many of Prolinnova's scheduled face-to-face meetings and instead hold the AfPW virtually using the Zoom platform. This being the first time that Prolinnova organised an international workshop virtually, a series of preparatory actions on using the Zoom platform were taken to ensure success. Despite its challenges, organising and holding the workshop virtually provided an opportunity to have a larger number of participants at a lower cost. A total of 50 participants (28 male and 22 female) from 11 African Country Platforms (CPs) took part in the workshop. It was organised and facilitated by members of the Prolinnova International Support Team (IST), primarily the two Subregional Coordinators (SRCs) in Africa.

The main purpose of the workshop was to allow the CPs in Africa to review their activities and lessons learned in promoting farmer innovation and farmer-led joint research and to plan for the next year. Being part of Prolinnova's strategy of regionalisation, the workshop was expected to help the CPs understand more about the regionalisation process, how it is conceptualised and its progress to date. The workshop also gave the Prolinnova Oversight Group (POG) an opportunity to share outcomes of its oversight role.

What transpired

The three days of the workshop were structured into 12 sessions. The first day opened with brief welcoming remarks from Joe Ouko, a farmer innovator from Kenya and member of the POG. Joe expressed his pleasure at the exceptional opportunity for the African region to host the first regional meeting conducted virtually and hoped that the workshop outputs would go a long way in benefiting all those within the network. Then there were self-introductions by the participants. The rest of the first day and part of the second day were dedicated to PowerPoint presentations from CPs summarising their achievements, challenges and opportunities. Each presentation was followed by a short session of questions, comments and recommendations. A total of 11 CPs gave presentations. In addition, presentations were also given by the two SRCs for Eastern & Southern Africa and West & Central Africa.

The CPs' presentations and the discussions highlighted achievements in areas of institutionalisation, identifying and documenting stories of farmer innovators and their innovation through the participatory innovation development (PID) process, fundraising efforts, governance, networking and scaling out of farmer innovations to others. The presentations also pointed out challenges facing the CPs such as the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic with its related public health restrictions, resource mobilisation, and insecurity because of terrorism. The SRCs' presentations focused on subregional achievements in terms of the regionalisation process, policy dialogue and advocacy, networking and partnership, resource mobilisation, backstopping and documentation. The main highlights of discussions on the SRC presentations were: the structure of subregional coordinating bodies, networking and how to engage with other actors such as FAO in agricultural research and development.

The latter part of the second day and most of third and last day were dedicated to presentations and discussions on issues of regionalisation (including subregional charters), networking and advocacy at regional and subregional level, and fundraising. The session on fundraising gave the participants an opportunity to discuss in breakout groups some ideas on how the CPs could mobilise local resources at national level for their projects. It was noted that CPs need to be innovative in identifying local sources of funds rather than depending only on external sources.

A session was also dedicated to feedback from the POG by a co-chair, Lisa Williams van Dijk. She provided an analysis of the Prolinnova network at national, subregional, regional and global level in terms of its

strengths, existing opportunities and challenges. She also introduced and welcomed two new Friends of Prolinnova, namely Mutizwa Mukute of Zimbabwe and Pratap Kumar Shrestha of Nepal. One of the key issues from Lisa's presentation was how to enhance networking between European and non-European CPs.

The third day also saw a presentation by Joshua Zake on the Prolinnova Strategic Plan for 2021–25, in which the network's strategic direction for the next five years was highlighted. Key issues that came out of the discussions on the strategy included: how to achieve policy-influencing outcomes, need to emphasise agroecology and the importance of multistakeholder partnerships. Towards the end of the day, a short session facilitated by Djibril and Vincent was dedicated to regional planning, during which the participants in subregional breakout groups discussed the previous action plan (achievements, challenges, outcomes) to determine the level of achievement and developed a new action plan for the coming year.

One of the sessions that is usually an integral part of the Prolinnova international and regional workshops is the Open Space, where the CPs can call for new areas of interest and try to draw in others to work with them. However, because of limited time, this was not possible. Instead, the session facilitator, Ann, compiled a list of topics that were of interest to be discussed in separate Zoom Open-Space sessions at a later date online. She asked the participants to indicate their choice of topics via the Zoom Chat function.

The workshop was concluded with an evaluation using the Zoom Poll facility and closing remarks, which were given by Chesha Wettasinha and Malex Alebikiya. Chesha appealed to the participants to give more attention to reinforcing their CPs in terms of governance and visibility of their operations, to be more aggressive in fundraising, to strengthen South–South cooperation and networking, and to upgrade their IT capacity. Malex, on his part, congratulated all CP teams and the organisers/ facilitators for the work done despite the constraints occasioned by the current Covid-19 pandemic.

Take away

In the final analysis, the workshop was well organised despite the fact that this was the first time it was done virtually. This was attributed to the intensive pre-workshop planning activities that included development of guidelines, capacity building and rehearsals on how to use the Zoom platform. However, a few challenges were noted concerning the technical arrangements. These included: the need to have CP coordinators better involved in the preparation, particularly with the presentations (including development of a template) and difficulties in making the workshop participatory enough.

The workshop provided a picture of the status of the CPs in Africa. It was clear that different CPs are at different levels of achievement in implementing PID processes, networking, resource mobilisation, governance etc. It was also clear that the regionalisation process has advanced considerably, as demonstrated by the successful organisation of the regional workshop and achievement towards the various pillars of regionalisation. Nevertheless, more work is required, especially in having the subregional charters endorsed by all the CPs, revival of dormant CPs, communication etc.

Finally, a number of issues were highlighted during the course of the workshop that merit pursuing before the next AfPW. These are:

- Advocacy and institutionalisation of promoting local innovation and PID, especially within universities and research institutions both at country and subregional/regional level;
- Monitoring and evaluation including internalising and using the current monitoring guidelines and how to monitor outcomes of policy dialogue and influencing;
- Resource mobilisation including capacity building through cross-learning from more successful CPs such as Prolinnova–Kenya as well as exploring local/national-level fundraising sources;
- Revival of dormant CPs and welcoming new ones, while recognising that CPs often go through cycles of activity and dormancy depending on resource availability and issues of governance;
- Enhancing networking and collaboration between North and South as well as South–South.
- Improving communication to stakeholders about PID through attractive media as well as communication between CPs and SRCs.

The next African Partners Workshop will be held in the year 2022, hopefully face-to-face.