

Prolinnova and Farmer-Led Research Networks (FaReNe):

Introduction and report (2016)

The Sahel is an environmentally sensitive region and climate change is likely to worsen the situation. Farmers therefore need to adapt their agricultural methods and practices to the changing climatic conditions and their effects. Successful agro-ecological intensification leads to higher productivity and improved food and nutrition security without having negative environmental impacts. Formal agricultural research and development (ARD) gives little attention to farmers' own innovation and focuses on research led by scientists.

An initiative funded by the McKnight Foundation (USA) under the umbrella of the Prolinnova community of practice seeks to strengthen and support farmer-led research networks (FaReNe) in which smallholders take the lead in joint experimentation by farmers and formal researchers for agro-ecological intensification, building on local knowledge and innovation.

FaReNe objectives are: 1) to identify and analyse existing local innovation processes and innovations and to improve and spread them through Participatory Innovation Development (PID) and Local Innovation Support Funds (LISFs); 2) to create / strengthen farmer-led research networks that take the lead in PID, LISF management and related innovation activities; and 3) to gain deeper insights into the praxis of farmer-led research networks and to spread and share lessons widely.

In November 2015, the three-year project was launched after a year-long inception phase that provided a sound basis to continue developing the initiative. The inception phase had strengthened the partnerships for the project between the Prolinnova International Secretariat and the networks main members in Burkina Faso (World Neighbors, Diobass, Réseau-MARP and Centre National de Recherche Scientifique et Technologie/CNRST) and in Mali (ADAF-Gallè, Institute d'Economie Rurale/IER and the farmer organisation AOPP). In Burkina Faso, the project started in the Passoré and Gnagna Provinces in the Northern and Mouhoun Regions; in Mali, the project started in Ségou and Mopti Regions.

A core activity is the strengthening of farmer-led research networks engaging in joint experimentation in which farmer innovators work with formal researchers and other actors in agricultural innovation processes to improve and spread promising local innovations in agro-ecological intensification and to scale up the joint innovation processes.

Local innovations identified for future joint experimentation

During the inception phase, innovative farmers and local innovations were identified, offering starting points for farmer-led processes of joint experimentation. In Mali, 17 farmer innovations were identified and characterised, including four that have been analysed in detail for joint experimentation. These are organisational innovations around environmental protection and better management of natural resources. Technologies implemented by innovative farmers in Burkina Faso in the pilot areas can be divided into three categories: i) soil and water conservation measures, e.g. using stone bunds, half-moons, *zai*, manure pits and composting; ii) restoration and preservation of vegetation cover through Assisted Natural Regeneration (ANR), planting endangered species and using plant nurseries; and iii) increased forage availability. Twelve innovators have been selected with their innovations for experimentation on and improvements to their innovations before their dissemination.

During the inception phase, research on farmer-led networks started. A national network will bring together the local networks whereas a regional network will link the networks of the two countries (Mali and Burkina Faso). The project is being carried out as part of the West African Community of Practice within the Collaborative Crop Research Program (CCRP) of McKnight Foundation, which will ensure that lessons are shared broadly.

The three-year project will allow building the network with innovative farmers. Farmers' innovations will be further identified, characterised and selected to conduct joint experimentation. Actors in the field will be trained by the local teams in PID and will document not only the innovations but also the innovation

processes. All the innovative farmers, experimenting farmers and researchers will develop jointly the relevant experimental design.

The project will pilot LISFs in Burkina Faso and Mali, which were successfully used by organisations in Eastern Africa and some Asian countries to channel resources to farmers for farmer-led experimentation and innovation. Supportive dissemination and policy-dialogue activities will upscale findings, and upscale and mainstream farmer-led approaches within formal ARD. Learning and reflection on the joint innovation processes and the praxis of farmer-led networks are integrated into all stages of the project.

Training on PID and LISF

A workshop was organised in Thiès, Senegal, with the main partners of the project: World Neighbors in Burkina Faso and ADAF-Gallè in Mali as well as two members of the Prolinnova International Support Team from The Netherlands.

The main objectives of the workshop were:

1. Building the capacities of the partners in the key concepts and principles of the PID approach;
2. Introduce and reflect on the establishment and implementation of LISFs;
3. Exchange between partners on the implementation of the project and the development of agreements on the major milestones of the project during its first year.

The workshop was focused on learning based on the experience of participants and PID and LISF experiences from various sources (Prolinnova-Niger, Prolinnova-South Africa and national platforms of the Prolinnova network, namely Cambodia, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Nepal, Tanzania, South Africa and Uganda).

Participants highlighted their understanding of local innovation as the process by which people develop new and better ways of doing things in their locality – using their own resources and on their own initiative. They may be exploring new possibilities simply out of curiosity, or may be responding and adapting to changes in the condition of natural resources, availability of assets, markets and other socio-economic and institutional contexts brought about by demographic trends, higher-level policies, disasters, climate change and other external influences, positive or negative.

Participants highlighted also their understanding of PID, which is an approach to agricultural research and development that is based on farmers' motivations and ideas about how to face a local challenge or capture an opportunity to improve livelihoods. Participants understood that PID involves partnership between farmers, development agents and – wherever possible – formal scientists and that it includes not only "hard" technologies but also "soft" socio-institutional and cultural innovations such as changes in gender roles.

Participants understood that at the heart of PID is farmer-led participatory research or farmer-led joint research, in which farmer innovators and farmers and other stakeholders engage in joint experimentation, leading to new technologies or socio institutional arrangements, such as new ways of community organisation, for more sustainable livelihoods. Participants also understood that PID often uses local innovation processes and the outcomes (farmer innovations) as entry points for farmer-led joint research where the focus during the workshop has been on principles and participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) of joint experimentation. The capacity building of partners in the PID approach included also the institutionalisation of PID and sustaining/strengthening the PID process through financing local innovation and PID processes.

Through LISF, funds are made accessible directly to farmers or their groups (not indirectly via development agencies) and the grants are used for innovation, experimentation and learning by and with farmers. Farmers and their organisations play a strong role in deciding on fund allocation.

Participants understood the main idea and reasons for LISFs and they highlighted their understanding of features of LISFs. These are core principles, innovative elements, types of costs covered, general criteria of selection and operation.

From PID/LISF experiences from Prolinnova-South Africa and taking into account the features of LISF, participants from both Mali and Burkina Faso made a country analysis of the LISF initiative. This initiative comprises two key elements, namely: the development of research proposals by farmers/farmer groups and management by the farmers of the financial funds allocated to them. This analysis allowed participants to identify (at the level of farmers/farmer groups of their countries) strengths (positive factors) and weaknesses (negative factors), internal and external factors to consider in the LISF initiative within the FaReNe project. From this analysis, participants identified corresponding potential and definitive actions to set up to ensure the functionality and sustainability of the LISF initiative. Then participants highlighted their understanding on the process of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) of the LISF activities in the FaReNe project.

LISF experiences, main challenges, best practices and LISF lessons from national platforms of the Prolinnova network were used as sources of inspiration for participants when returning to their countries.

The partners exchanged about the implementation of the project and the development of agreements on the major milestones of the project.

During these sessions, on the third day of the workshop, participants concentrated on the definition and planning of the LISF actions as well as critically reflected on the implementation by participants of farmer innovators networks, conceptualisation from participants' experiences and definition of next steps and actions, namely: what was done, what remains to be done and what is needed to get this done.

From country presentations on the FaReNe activities implemented, it can be observed that each country team has its own rhythm of implementation while following the main core and agreed activities for the project. In the first months of the project, both country teams concentrated on characterising the farmer innovations selected for joint experiments. During the workshop, these innovations were screened on the basis of agro-ecological criteria and principles. This showed that the farmer innovations selected in Mali and Burkina Faso for joint experiments have, in general, a wide agro-ecological span of application, which is very advantageous in a Sahelian environment characterised by high environmental variability.

Participants also reflected on the roles of key actors of the FaReNe project in the two countries and at the regional and international levels. This reflection enabled participants to define the main actors at the level of each country and at the regional and international levels, to justify the choice of these actors, to stress the expectations of stakeholders (expected results), to show what the players need to/can commit (responsibilities) and to define what needs to be done to engage actively stakeholders in the project.

A critical reflection on the PM&E process of the FaReNe project enabled to check and amend a simplified PM&E guide with comments and suggestions from the country teams, to exchange about what to do for the implementation of PM&E, what is needed, how the IST team can help and to agree on the needs and next steps.

Besides agreeing on the guidelines to report (narrative and financially) during June 2016, a reflection on the process of the project documentation referring to the logic of the 'Magic Wheel' (Why?, What?, Who?, How?, When? and for Who?) took place. Participants made agreements on the issue of documentation according to the following procedure: overall objective, specific objectives, expected results, activities implemented, results (with objectively verifiable indicators) and impacts.

It was agreed that a workshop of the partners will take place in Burkina Faso towards the end of the year 2016 as well as some general agreements on the main actions for the rest of the year 2016 and in 2017. Forecasts were also discussed.

Planning by the participants of the LISF actions could not be fully finalised during the workshop. It is therefore recommended to participants from Burkina Faso and Mali to follow up the action planning as soon as possible, related to the 'Who' (actors), the 'When' (period) and the 'How' (methods/tools) for their LISF action planning.

A complete report of this workshop can be found (in French) [here](#).