



International Farmer Innovation Day (IFID) Celebration in Ethiopia:

Axum, 7 December, 2013

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December 2013

Supported by



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The International Farmers Innovation Day (IFID) was celebrated in Ethiopia, Axum, on 7 December, with the theme: “Farmers’ Innovation Improves their Resilience to Change”, in collaboration with the Axum Platform members – Aksum University (AKU), Best Practice Association (BPA), Institute for Sustainable Development (ISD), innovator farmers, District Agricultural Office, Axum Agriculture Research Center and PROLINNOVA–Ethiopia (PE) represented by Poverty Action Network in Ethiopia (PANE).

The organisers conducted a one-day consultative meeting that largely involved innovator farmers, experts from Zonal and District government offices such as the District Agricultural Office, and Aksum University as well as partner organisations largely drawn from La’elai Maichew, Tahitai Maichew and Mai Tsebri Districts in Tigray Region and from the South Wollo area of Amhara Region.

The meeting included presentations followed by lively discussions in the morning and field visits in the afternoon to model/innovative farmers. The resource persons came from BPA, ISD, PE, Aksum University, innovator farmers as well as Axum Agricultural Research Center. They shared their experiences with the audience through presentations and question-and-answer sessions.

The meeting began with an introductory session by Hailu Araya from ISD, and the founder of BPA. He explained that the aim of the meeting is – as member of the international PROLINNOVA network – to celebrate the International Farmers’ Innovation Day. It will be useful for strengthening and connecting the different stakeholders and to share their experience under the umbrella of the Axum PROLINNOVA Ethiopia Platform. The main two activities on the programme of the meeting are: i) presenting different experiences to stimulate discussion among participants; and ii) seeing the field reality with one’s own eyes. He also thanked Aksum University for offering a meeting hall for free and then invited the representative of the university to open the workshop.

The opening remark was made by Ms Letish, Community Development and Technology Transfer Director of Aksum University (AKU). She underlined the very important role of the university in such initiatives and AKU’s readiness to work hand-in-glove with partners, especially communities. She added that integration of responsible stakeholders such as academic institutions, CSOs, various government organisations as well as the local community is of paramount importance to increase farmers’ resilience to change, boost productivity and enhance food security.

After the opening remark, a presentation entitled “**Local innovation as resilience to vulnerability: Ethiopian experiences**” was made by Yohannes GebreMichael.

His presentation elaborated on the terms “innovation” and “local innovation” and why we need this, depicting innovators as “agents of change”. The need to focus on attitudinal change of farmers as well as other key stakeholders was given due attention to pursue to gain a proper understanding of farmer innovation and participatory innovation development (PID).

He said that an enabling environment is indispensable to advance choices/options of farmers so as to enhance their coping mechanism crop, vegetable and fruit production, beekeeping, animal husbandry and others. Moreover, a participatory approach to solving problems can evolve to small-scale research, capacity building of responsible stakeholders – government and non-government actors – working with farmers and other local community members as well as exchange visits to harmonise the relationship and heighten farmers' adaptation cum innovation.

Visibility yet also invisibility, synergetic effects and continuing changes were cited as a few characteristics of local innovation processes. With pictures, he presented local innovations seen in different parts of Ethiopia, explaining the reasons behind the perceived changes.

His presentation was followed by lively discussion. Farmers participated most actively in the discussion through both asking and answering questions. This helped farmers to express their feeling. The confidence observed in the innovator farmers was very attractive.



Figure 1 - Partial view of workshop participants in Axum

Then, farmers shared their experiences and another lively discussion followed. For example, farmers shared their success stories identified as an innovation in goat breeding so as to increase productivity in both meat and milk. Yet, though farmers were certain about the increase in productivity, the exact amount and quality could not be identified. Another example was the different types of beehives made by farmers. These are the points where development agents or formal researchers and small-scale farmers can collaborate with a view to sustaining the innovation, proving it scientifically which also makes it more adaptable to others, the participants underlined. Apart from this, issues related with innovation and PID were raised and discussed by the participants:

- ✚ The need to create and raise awareness of higher-level agricultural and related government experts on the significance of participatory research rather than focusing on the usual top-down approach, to make the participatory approach more feasible
- ✚ Integration with AKU and other research and academic institutions
- ✚ The very important role of empowering farmers so as to attain food security
- ✚ The importance of recognising local socio-economic values to be effective when implementing PID
- ✚ The significance of partnership and networking among different stakeholders
- ✚ The need to change the attitude of university students towards farmers so as to make them work together and solidify the “Friends of Farmers” initiative launched in Aksum University
- ✚ The effectiveness of convincing farmers rather than enforcing to come up with successful outputs.

The presenters responded to the comments that engagement of responsible stakeholders is crucial along with establishing permanent partnership. It is also planned to conduct more capacity-building trainings for those responsible, along with the available budget, acknowledging the need to convince higher-level experts to be on the same page. The recognition of local socio-economic values is the pillar of innovation as well as PID, it was underlined. Moreover, students and staff of AKU promised to galvanise the initiative of setting up the “Friends of Farmers” scheme. Overall, a general understanding was reached to promote a participatory approach while working with farmers, convinced that there is ample local knowledge with farmers and they are persistent innovators. Thus, an inclusive communication channel is fundamental: horizontal, bottom-up as well as top-down to make sure everyone is heard in the process.

In the afternoon, farmers in three groups went on field visits to three areas around Axum:

i. Rama: model female farmer

One group paid a visit in Rama with an innovator and model female farmer named Haregua, who attended formal school to fifth grade and then began farming in a humble manner. She first planted tomatoes and earned money, enabling her to buy a waterpump. With lots of challenges but without being beaten, she could go up the ladder of success step by step, and sharing her vast experiences with solid help to the surrounding farmers. One thing that distinguishes Haregua is her participatory approach benefiting the nearby farmers, integrating in her farm the giving of lessons and sharing of experiences. This benefited her by preventing stealing from her 12 ha fruit farm planted mainly with mango trees. She has also bio-gas and produces compost for her farm, using her animal fattening and dairy enterprises. Currently, Haregua has a total capital of 23 million Birr (*ca* €860). She stressed the need for attitudinal change and adapting to existing situations, adding to what has already been done.

Some of the innovations she developed are protecting fruit trees from insects, reducing soil salinity and reducing striga infestation through intersowing with *Desmodium* .



Figure 2 - Haregua, in the centre, sharing her experiences with visiting farmers

ii. Debreberhan

Other group visited the goat breeding initiative that aimed at enhancing productivity of meat and milk both in terms of quality and quantity. The farmers exchanged views with those who engaged in breeding the goats and shared experiences. The visitors emphasized that the existing information should be documented and shared with others.

This is a goat breeding initiative started by the Axum Platform with financial support from BPA and ISD. Two pairs (male and female) of goats were given to this farmer network. They gave birth to two new goats. The responsibility for managing the goats and disseminating the information is given to the community members.

iii. Mai Tsa'eda

The group that went to Mai Tsaeda could take lessons from the remarkable soil and water conservation works carried out in the area, incorporating catchments, checkdams, long stretched terraces, water reservoirs *inter alia*. Overall, the farmers exchanged views, shared experiences and learned from each other, paving the way for further innovations and adaptation mechanisms.

A total of 114 participants attended the consultative meeting, including 76 male farmers, 17 female farmers and 21 experts from Aksum University, both male and female, the District Agricultural Bureau as well as other relevant bureaus. They were transported by 8 minibuses to the three locations.