

Backstopping visit to Prolinnova–South Africa (with a detour through Mozambique) by the Prolinnova Subregional Coordinator (SRC) for Eastern & Southern Africa (ESA) (5–10 June 2022)

Report by Jacob Barasa Wanyama, SRC–ESA, based on notes made by Richard Chuene, Limpopo

Background

Since being launched in 2004, the Prolinnova Country Platform (CP) in South Africa (SA) has undertaken numerous externally funded projects in various areas. Most notable are: 1) establishing Local Innovation Support Facility (LISF) to promote local innovation (LI) and participatory innovation development (PID); 2) investigating the role that LI and PID can play in terms of preventing infection or overcoming the challenges associated with HIV/AIDS; 3) farmer-led documentation; and 4) Nuffic-funded tailor-made training and mentoring to develop capacity in PID.

After a period of inactivity, the CP started a process of revival in 2020. Ms Zanele Shezi, who was then with the Institute of Natural Resources (INR) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) Province, initiated efforts to strengthen the CP by engaging with interested people in other provinces. This involved, holding discussions with Ernest Letsoalo, who was then based at the University of Limpopo (UL) but recently moved to the University of Venda, also in Limpopo Province; Sifiso Shandu, who is with the Department of Agriculture in Mpumalanga Province; and Michael Malinga, who until late 2020 was with an NGO in Pietermaritzburg called Pietermaritzburg Agency for Community Social Action (PACSA) and then moved to Mahlathini Rural Development Foundation (MRDF, with a strong focus on participatory research approaches). The challenge, however, is the low interest from government institutions, making it difficult to bring them on board. In addition, many nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in SA are faced with a problem of insufficient resources to engage in activities in the field.



Fig. 1: Ernest Letsoalo (UL) explains the purpose of the field visit while Richard Chuene takes notes

During a meeting between Zanele and the SRC in September 2020, she expressed her keen interest in getting the CP up and running, seeking support in resource mobilisation and facilitating interaction between the CP in SA and other CPs in ESA, for example, between people in Limpopo and Mozambique, as a way of strengthening both CPs. However, Zanele has since left INR and is no longer available to continue spearheading these efforts.

On 26 April 2022, the Prolinnova–SA Task Team members held a meeting to share their experiences with regard to Prolinnova activities in SA and to deliberate on the status of the CP. The meeting was attended by Brigid Letty from INR, who is also a member of the Prolinnova International Support Team (IST) and the Prolinnova Oversight Group; Ernest, then with UL's Centre for Rural Community Empowerment (CRCE); Richard Chuene from Limpopo Department of Agriculture & Rural Development (LDARD) Horticulture; Ms

Refiloe Thobejane from LDARD Aquaculture, who is working with two colleges and two universities (Limpopo and Venda); Zanele (INR) and the then Prolinnova–SA contact person; and Ms Charlotte Mohlabi from LDARD Crop Science. Michael and Ms Rebinah Sasa from Mpumalanga Province did not attend but sent their apologies.

The issues discussed included:

- The status of Prolinnova–SA, with the last meeting having been held in January 2022;
- The ongoing proposal for a follow-up project to the SULCI-FaNs (Scaling Up Local Capacity to Innovate in Food and Nutrition Security) project in Africa;
- Ongoing PID activities including Rephedine Community Project, survey on aquaculture, use of *Boscia albitunca* as coffee and innovation in *Bab Vidima* – a zero-grazing approach – and rabbit farming;
- Institutionalisation of PID within curriculum and possibility of engaging with the Universities of Mpumalanga and Venda (community development divisions);
- Co-development of technical and social solutions in improved water supply, and the need to bring in other actors to form the PID triangle;
- The SRC’s backstopping visit planned for June 2022.

Justification and objectives for the backstopping visit

There have recently been efforts to encourage organisations in the Provinces of KZN (led by Zanele and Brigid) and Limpopo (led by Ernest and Richard) to re-engage with Prolinnova. Several interesting initiatives are ongoing in each of these provinces. Among the key initiatives of interest are institutionalising the PID approach into the UL curriculum and social innovation in water development.

Meanwhile, with the current process of developing a proposal for a follow-up to the current SULCI-FaNs project to be submitted to Misereor, Germany, an idea is being conceptualised where a number of CPs – including the one in SA because of its experience – are being considered to play the role of mentoring other CPs. In this case, Prolinnova–SA would mentor other CPs in Southern Africa. The recent departure of Zanele also created a need to review and provide support in strengthening the governance of the CP. This backstopping visit was therefore aimed at supporting the Prolinnova–SA team’s effort to strengthen their CP and prepare themselves for their probable new role in the follow-up project to SULCI-FaNS.

Objectives of the visit

The specific objectives of the backstopping mission were:

1. To assess the situation of Prolinnova–SA and offer assistance on specific issues of institutionalising PID within UL, government research institutions etc;
2. To undertake a field visit to a farmer innovation group to review PID activities and identify priorities for possible follow-up;
3. To meet with members of the CP’s National Steering Committee (NSC) and other potential partners to discuss opportunities for strengthening the CP partnership in promoting the PID approach.

Expected outputs as per the ToRs

1. Status of CP’s PID institutionalisation into universities and local government research institutions reviewed and action plans developed/agreed on;
2. LI/PID activities by CP partners and farmer innovators are appraised and appropriate advice provided;

3. Priorities for future PID activities identified and action plans agreed on;
4. Back-to-office report on the mission submitted to IST and ACDEP/Project Coordinator including financial report on funds received and spent submitted to ACDEP;
5. Short article on highlights of the visit produced and published on Prolinnova website.

The visit proceedings

The backstopping visit took six days from Sunday 5 June to Friday 10 June, with the first and last days being for travel. In addition, the SRC made a private detour to Mozambique, where he met with an NCS member of Prolinnova–Mozambique, Domenico Liuzzi of KULIMA.

The Prolinnova–SA backstopping started on 6 June with a briefing meeting with the Prolinnova–SA Task Team at UL's CRCE in Polokwane, Limpopo Province. Five people joined the meeting, including the SRC and three members of the Limpopo Task Team: Ernest (UL), Richard (LDARD) and Charlotte (LDARD). In addition, Elliot Zwane as the head of the Department of Rural Community Development at UL, attended the meeting. Three Task Team members – Refiloe (LDARD), Koketso Mphahlele (UL) and Rebinah (LDARD) – were absent with apologies.



Fig. 2: Meeting members of Prolinnova–SA Limpopo Task Team

During the briefing, the SRC explained his role and made the Task Team aware of the proposal being made to Misereor and the CP's possible role. It was also clarified that the Task Team represents the Limpopo branch of Prolinnova–SA. There was concern whether the team should continue with reviving the provincial platform as a branch of the Country Platform, since the latter is still being revived yet Zanele has left. These issues were deferred to the debriefing meeting on 9 June.

From the briefing, some key points arose about possible participation of Prolinnova–SA in the SULCI-FaNS follow-up project, especially with regard to supporting institutionalisation activities. These are:

- Possibility of student internships as entry points for courses at UL and other colleges in Limpopo Province (PID and as way of changing attitudes among professionals and students);
- Implementation of Participatory Rural Extension by LDARD with low-external-input advisory service etc
- Possibility of Prolinnova–SA's mentoring other CPs in Southern Africa, especially in the area of institutionalising PID within universities and advisory services.

On Day 2, the Prolinnova–Limpopo Task Team visited Lebowakgomo, Limpopo Province, to meet members of Refentje Agriculture and Projects. The meeting started off with a prayer spoken by a farmer, who encouraged the participants to feel free. Then the facilitator of Refentje, Jackson Kadiaka (a farmer), introduced the Task Team and the LDARD Communication Division. The farmers then had an opportunity to introduce themselves.

Ernest explained that the meeting was a follow-up to the promise made to farmers regarding the intentions of UL and Prolinnova–SA to mobilise and visit innovative farmers. He apologised that one member of the Prolinnova–SA Task Team from KZN, Brigid, could not make it to the meeting. He then introduced the Subregional Coordinator (SRC) for Prolinnova Eastern and Southern Africa (ESA), Jacob Wanyama, and explained that the main purpose of the meeting was to know more about farmers' innovation and to explain to farmers what Prolinnova is all about.

Refentje¹ Agriculture and Projects then presented some innovations it is working on. This group started in 2019 with a gathering of individuals who, even though not farmers and having no experience in farming, realised they need food every day. In discussion among themselves, they came up with an idea of organic farming, after realising that most food they eat is produced with synthetic external inputs that contribute to global warming and the foods are also causing sicknesses. After unsuccessfully seeking land, they thought about indigenous knowledge (IK) that their ancestors had used for survival, especially during drought periods.



Fig. 3: Members of Refentje Agriculture and Projects in Lebowakgomo (Limpopo Province)

One example of IK was using the roots of the wild *mohlopi* (*Boscia albitrunca*) plant to make maize meal to cook as porridge. However, they decided to make a coffee instead. They sell the coffee on the local market (people come and buy from them), and customers claim that the coffee has health benefits. They took it to UL for laboratory analysis of the ingredients. As a result of selling the product, the group has secured about 10 ha of land to start cultivating the plant and bought a grinding machine to make their work easier.

Some of the challenges the group faces include: 1) the wild plants are not protected, so anyone has access to them or the local authorities can sell/use the area where they harvest; 2) the product has no bar code; 3) since they harvest from different locations in large quantities, they have high transport costs; 4) farmers use the homestead of one of the farmers, which is a small area; and 5) they need funds to develop the *ca* 10 ha land to propagate the *mohlopi* plant.



Fig. 4: Members of Refentje Agriculture and Projects presenting their achievements

In future, the group hopes to provide income for farmers, secure a big market globally, create jobs and add organic vegetables to their products. It sells its products to all age groups. Group members were trained by AgriSETA (Agricultural Sector Education Training Authority) about marketing, but they use IK in relation to the processing of the product. It was suggested to take the plant to UL for analysis of other parts such as leaves, fruits etc. to check their uses. It was agreed that this is good innovation with potential to go to another level.

Box 1: Process of preparing *mohlopi* (*Boscia albitrunca*) coffee

- The group went to different local authorities and got a permit for harvesting the *mohlopi* plant in the wild.
- Since *mohlopi* coffee is made from the plant's roots, the group harvests only one side of the root system and marks it to avoid overexploitation. The roots are cut at the far end and Vaseline blue seal is put on them to allow them to regrow. The next harvest is done on the other side of the root system.
- The harvested roots are washed, chopped and put on an open space to dry. It takes 3–4 days during summer and a week or more during winter to dry completely. After drying, the chopped roots are ground and put in a big three-legged pot smeared inside with olive oil, and then fried and packaged without adding anything.

¹ "Refentje" literally means "we are victorious".

The SRC used the opportunity to explain to the group what Prolinnova is and does: it is an NGO-initiated international learning network that promotes local innovation processes in ecologically oriented agriculture and natural resource management. He indicated that, as SRC for ESA, he works with CPs in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe, in addition to SA. The network emphasises supporting farmers' capacity to innovate through networking, sharing of information and looking for resources. He gave the example of the Global Farmer



Fig. 5: *Boscia albitunca* coffee product

Innovation Fair virtual platform through which farmers interacted and shared experiences. He suggested that, through Prolinnova-SA, farmers in Limpopo could be connected to other farmers in the world through social media and thus gain opportunities for resource mobilisation. He clarified that Prolinnova does not provide funding but can connect innovators to sources of funding and can help in applying for the funding. The SRC promised to try and organise farmer-to-farmer sharing between Ethiopian farmers who produce coffee and Refentje Agriculture and Projects. Meanwhile, the Prolinnova-SA Task Team will engage other stakeholders, also in government, to work with Refentje Agriculture and Projects.

On the last day of the visit, 9 June, a debriefing meeting was held with the Task Team in the LDARD office in Polokwane. It was chaired by Richard and attended by five other participants: Luther Mkhonho, Refiloe and Charlotte (LDARD), Ernest (UL) and the SRC. Two others had expected to attend – Koketso (UL) and Rebinah (LDARD) – but did not. Brigid joined via Zoom.

Richard opened the meeting with a prayer followed by a welcoming message from Luther as Manager of LDARD Horticulture. This was followed by self-introductions including a brief about each participant's responsibility in their work.

Charlotte (LDARD) explained that the purpose of the meeting was to re-establish Prolinnova activities and the Limpopo Task Team. For 12 years, Prolinnova-SA had been very active in Limpopo but then slowed down because of structural changes and movement of employees in LDARD.

Refiloe then briefly presented the role of LDARD related to farmer innovators. Under the Directorate of Agriculture Regulatory and Technology Development in LDARD, there are many programmes. The focus of her brief was on the role of research, technology and development. She explained that the Directorate's mandate is to:

- Improve agricultural production through conducting, facilitating and coordinating research and technology development;
- Disseminate information on research and technology development to relevant stakeholders;
- Manage and maintain research infrastructure facilities (research farms, laboratories) and provide support services to perform its research and technology-transfer functions.

They use a systems approach whereby farmers, extension officers, researchers and any other stakeholders who may be affected come together and contribute towards the research work. In this process, the extension officer plays a mediatory role between farmers and researchers. Farmers do not adopt new technology if they are not part the process.

There was a question regarding the technology transferred. It was explained that the extension officers work with farmers on a daily basis and know the farmers' needs. The officers then communicate with other relevant stakeholders based on the farmers' needs. In most cases, farmers do not allow people to come without an extension officer.

Richard gave a presentation on the history of the partnership between Prolinnova and LDARD. LDARD had a branch called Research & Training with a sub-branch called Research Services, which comprised four divisions. One focussed on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) research and innovation. The IKS Division had partners such as government sectors and NGOs as well as Prolinnova–SA, who worked together with farmers of the Diphagane Garden Project at Diphagane Village, Makhuduthamaga Municipality in Sekhukhune District, Limpopo Province. The farmers had an innovation of bio-pesticide (which comprised six plants that were ground and mixed to form a concoction) used to control pests in their vegetable crops. They were able to get funds from Prolinnova for farmer-led joint experimentation on their bio-pesticide.

However, the collaboration later faced challenges because of difficulty in managing funds that were deposited into farmers' accounts, structural changes in LDARD, movement/departure of officials and the taking over of IKS by the Premier's office. On account of these challenges, the joint testing of the bio-pesticide was not completed and apparently, the project was closed.

One lesson learned is that the institutionalisation process can be negatively affected by structural changes within an organisation. Luther felt that, since the ultimate goal is to commercialise the innovation, we should think about the funds to improve the innovation. Ernest pointed out that Prolinnova is a platform to share knowledge and help farmers apply to various donors for funds, and this meeting was aimed at revitalising it in Limpopo Province.

Ernest gave the history of UL's partnership with Prolinnova and LDARD. He stated that UL started to work with Prolinnova in March 2004, when Ernest went to Ethiopia on behalf of UL to attend the Prolinnova international partners workshop. There he presented a poster on how UL works with rural communities and with farmers in particular. They were three South Africans: in addition to him, Ms Monique Salomon from Farmer Support Group in KZN and Tim Hart from Western Cape Province. Prolinnova–SA started after that workshop. The drivers of Prolinnova–SA were Monique, Brigid and Ernest. The team strengthened the CP by engaging the Departments of Agriculture in Limpopo and Mpumalanga Provinces. In Limpopo Province, Prolinnova was easy to establish because there was already a Participatory Extension Approach, which was very similar to Prolinnova's activities and vision.

The SRC then gave a presentation on the Prolinnova ESA platform, the purpose of his visit and his initial observations. He explained that the visit's main objectives were to assess how the CP is performing in SA, particularly in Limpopo Province, to help it with specific issues of institutionalising PID within UL and government research institutions, and to advise on resource mobilisation and governance (NSC). He therefore met with members of Prolinnova–SA – the current network and the NSC – and other potential partners to discuss opportunities for strengthening the CP partnership in promoting the LI/PID approach. He was also to make a field visit to a group of farmer innovators to review their PID activities and identify priorities for possible follow-up. He mentioned that Prolinnova is working on a project proposal and the CP in SA has been included in the proposal to play the role of mentoring neighbouring CPs.

The SRC explained that Prolinnova is not a registered NGO. It is a multistakeholder platform, and members from each country-level network share and learn from each other's experiences and plan and implement initiatives together. Prolinnova involves all people who are working with farmers. It encourages farmers to solve problems on their own initiative using their own knowledge. The role of extension officers and scientists is to help improve what farmers are already working on.

The field visit to Lebowakgomo may have had some success, at least to the extent that Refentje Agriculture and Projects has changed "indigenous knowledge" into "innovation". The IK related to *mohlopi* was to make maize meal from the roots, but farmers make coffee from it. The group, recognising that Prolinnova–SA has experience, shows interest in Prolinnova activities.

After the presentations and discussions, it was agreed that:

- LDARD will be involved in Prolinnova–SA activities (indicated by Luther);
- the Prolinnova–SA Task Team will be responsible for identifying and mobilising innovators/farmers;
- the Prolinnova–SA Task Team will continue to include Ernest, Richard and Koketso.

Return through Mozambique

Because the SRC was in SA, which neighbours Mozambique, and has close friends and family in Mozambique, he decided to make a private detour to Maputo and used the opportunity to follow up on his previous backstopping visit there in March 2022. He was able to meet with a representative of one of the members of the NSC of Prolinnova–Mozambique, Domenico Liuzzi of KULIMA. The SRC encouraged Domenico to call a meeting of the NSC to deliberate on the issues raised in the report on the March visit. Since then, there has been much exchange between NSC members regarding a possible meeting and other issues. They are trying to identify a date for a meeting and asked the SRC to avail of a paid Zoom platform for it. The SRC would like to request the IST to assist in availing of this platform since the ACDEP one is no longer accessible to the SRCs.

Visit conclusions, general observations and recommendations/future actions

1. CP governance, coordination and networking

- The current Prolinnova–SA Task Team, through a series of meetings, should continue to work toward strengthening the CP. This could be done by identifying interested organisations at the provincial level and establishing provincial-level teams and team leaders to take this process forward.
- The Task Team should continue with its efforts to reconstitute the NSC. These efforts could build from the level of each of the three provinces – Limpopo, KZN and Mpumalanga – that currently constitute the CP. The Limpopo team seems the most active in this direction and should be encouraged to forge ahead while roping in the other two provincial teams with support from INR.
- The Limpopo team – comprising Ernest, Richard, Koketso Charlotte Refiloe and Rebinah – is keen to set up a provincial-level platform. Despite the fact that Ernest has left UL, the university to which he has moved (University of Venda) is still in Limpopo Province. He should therefore be encouraged to continue working with the team in strengthening the provincial platform, considering his long experience and interest in institutionalisation processes.
- As per the meeting of 26 April 2022, the Prolinnova–SA CP is run by a Task Team with the following members: Ernest (formerly UL), Koketso (UL), Richard (LDARD), Refiloe (LDARD), Charlotte (LDARD), Michael (MRDF), Rebinah (LDARD) and Brigid (INR). This team should organise itself into an interim governance group by electing its team leader and other relevant office bearers.

2. Communication and networking

- The CP is encouraged to document and publish lessons learned so far in institutionalising PID in universities. This could be spearheaded by Ernest (UL) and Richard (LDARD).
- One member of the Task Team should be invited to join the African Partners Workshop to take place in Nairobi, Kenya, in October 2022.

3. Resource mobilisation

- The Task Team members should double their efforts in scouting for funding opportunities and work with the SRC in submitting proposals. The SRC is interested in supporting multi-CP resource mobilisation. The team was encouraged to identify possible opportunities and come up with draft concept notes, which could be improved on by the SRC and other members of the IST.

- In particular, the team is encouraged to support Refentje Agriculture and Projects to access funds to further develop and commercialise their coffee innovation.

4. Supporting the ongoing PID initiatives

- There are a number of interesting PID-related initiatives that need to be supported. These include:
 - o Institutionalising PID into universities and advisory services in Limpopo Province through student mentorship and curriculum development and incorporating the PID approach in rural extension services, for example, with LDARD Rural Community Development.
 - o Social innovation on access to water in KZN.
- The capacity and institutional framework of the CP should be developed in preparation for its possible role as mentor for other CPs in Southern Africa – with special emphasis on its experience in institutionalising PID within universities and advisory services.
- The Prolinnova–SA Task Team should continue identifying and mobilising innovators.

5. Follow-up to Prolinnova–Mozambique backstopping visit

- Encourage the key members of the Prolinnova–Mozambique NSC to hold a meeting to re-organise their NSC governance and come up with an action plan for strengthening their CP and mobilising resources for field-level activities.

List of acronyms

CP	Country Platform
CRCE	Centre for Rural Community Empowerment
ESA	Eastern & Southern Africa
IK	indigenous knowledge
IKS	Indigenous Knowledge Systems
INR	Institute of Natural Resources
IST	International Support Team
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
LDARD	Limpopo Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
LI	local innovation
MRDF	Mahlathini Rural Development Foundation
NGO	nongovernmental organisation
NSC	National Steering Committee
PID	participatory innovation development
SA	South Africa
SRC	Subregional Coordinator
UL	University of Limpopo

Annex 1: Summary of itinerary

SULCI-FaNS

Date	Time	Activity
Sunday 5 June	Afternoon	Arrived in Polokwane, met at airport and taken to the Golden Pillow Hotel by Elliot Zwane, Chairman of UL's Department of Rural Community Development
Monday 6 June	Morning	Debriefing meeting with Prolinnova-SA Task Team members at UL
Tuesday 7 June	Whole day	Field visit to Lebowakgomo (Limpopo Province) and meeting with members of Refentje Agriculture and Projects
Wednesday 8 June	One hour	Briefly introduced 2 members of Prolinnova-SA (Richard Chuene and Ernest Letsoalo) to the IST during its monthly meeting
Thursday 9 June	Morning	Debriefing meeting with members of Prolinnova-SA Task Team
Friday 10 June	Whole day	Travel from Polokwane to Johannesburg and then to Maputo, Mozambique (privately)
Thursday 16 June	Afternoon	Met with Domenico Liuzzi of KULIMA, a member of Prolinnova-Mozambique's NSC, as follow-up to previous backstopping visit in March 2022
Sunday 19 June	Whole day	Travelled from Maputo to Nairobi through Johannesburg (SA), Lilongwe and Blantyre (Malawi)