

# Workshop on promoting farmer innovation in Benin unleashes local capacities for farmer-led research and development

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ELI-FaNS–Benin Coordinator, Nicole Sarah, discussing documentation of local innovation with the Bembéréké Municipality Food and Nutrition Focal Point, Ismaël Chabi Seko.

*Credit: Georges Djohy*

## Introduction

The youngest multistakeholder Country Platform in the international Prolinnova network, Prolinnova–Benin, has joined the ELI-FaNS project: ‘Expanding the promotion of local innovation for food

security and healthy nutrition to build resilience with a focus on women’. This project, which started in January 2023, is funded by the German NGO Misereor and is coordinated by the Association of Church-based Development Projects

(ACDEP), a local NGO in northern Ghana. On-the-ground activities are being carried out in five African countries, the other four being Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa.

The project aims to improve the food and nutrition security and livelihoods of small-scale farmers and their communities by integrating a farmer-led participatory approach to agroecological innovation into the regular work of agricultural research and development organisations. This should enable farming communities to continue to deal with the new challenges they face through co-creation of technical, social and institutional solutions, working together with other research and development actors.

Prolinnova–Benin is focusing its work in ELI-FaNS in two districts in the north of the country, namely Bembéréké and Tchaourou. To launch the project, the coordination team in Benin held a workshop in early May 2023 in Ina Agricultural College in Bembéréké District. Here, the team introduced the project and made the local actors aware of the existence and importance of local innovation initiated by small-scale farmers themselves. This meeting was an opportunity not only for learning but also to reveal and unleash local capacities and enthusiasm to collaborate in farmer-led research and development.

The workshop was attended by 29 people, almost half of them women. About 25% were farmers and another 25% were college students and recent graduates. The other participants came from local NGOs, the local government administration, traditional leadership, agricultural research and education organisations, agricultural advisory services and a microfinance institution that promotes entrepreneurship related to agriculture.

## Introducing Prolinnova–Benin and ELI-FaNS

To start off, the coordinator of the ELI-FaNS project in Benin, Nicole Sarah, introduced the objectives and activities of the international Prolinnova network, with the vision of a ‘world where women and men farmers play decisive roles in agroecology and



Kenyan innovator Joe Ouko feeding his Locally Formulated Dairy Goat Meal

*Credit: Chesha Wettasinha*

natural resource management innovation processes for sustainable livelihoods'. She explained how the Prolinnova–Benin platform was recently created to promote such local innovation processes in Benin. She highlighted the bottom-up approach of the network, which seeks to recognise and promote the knowledge and creativity of small-scale farmers – and, in the ELI-FaNS project, particularly of women and youth in the farming communities.

She emphasised that the project seeks to generate evidence of farmer-led innovation and participatory innovation development (PID) for food and nutrition security and, on the basis of this, to engage in dialogue with researchers, development agents and policymakers about the value of this approach. She pointed out that Prolinnova–Benin, as a newcomer to the international network, could benefit greatly from the ELI-FaNS project to build up the strength of the national network in Benin, ensuring good governance, regular monitoring and high-quality documentation of the activities and lessons learnt at the project's action-learning sites.

### Identifying local innovation

The coordinator of the Prolinnova–Benin platform, Georges Djohy, explained what is meant by 'local innovation' – new and better ways of

doing things in a particular location – and how this differs from 'traditional' or 'indigenous knowledge' inherited from parents and grandparents and how it differs from 'invention': a technology that is completely new to the world. He gave an example from the Country Platform in Kenya of a local technical innovation that small-scale farmers developed independently: Locally Formulated Dairy Goat Meal (LOFODA-G-Meal) composed of chopped and dry leaves that farmers had collected. They store the feed and give it to their goats when there are not so many fresh leaves for them to browse. This innovation has made families practising it more secure in terms of food availability and good nutrition, increased family income, enhanced collaboration within the community, and made the community more resilient to climate change.

Georges also shared some ways to identify cases of local innovation, such as by being very observant when in the field and talking with 'key informants', people who know the community and the area well because of their long experience working there or their leadership responsibilities. It is also possible to conduct 'snowball' interviews, asking the interviewed person to suggest other people who might know of local innovations and asking these new interviewees the same question.

Some Prolinnova Country Platforms have sent out calls for cases of local innovation through posters, flyers, local newspapers and community radio. Others have asked volunteers, such as students or teachers, to identify cases of local innovation in the community.

Georges stressed the importance of recognising and promoting local innovation processes to be able to achieve sustainable development.

The workshop participants expressed enthusiasm about this approach, which was new to them, and asked several questions, especially about examples of social and institutional innovation and the roles of other actors in stimulating and supporting farmers' creativity.

Then, working in four small groups, the participants discussed how they understand the concept of local innovation, shared examples of local innovation they had observed themselves, jointly selected one such innovation related to food security, and reflected on why this particular local innovation should be taken into account to improve food security in the locality.

Some examples of local innovations that came up in the group discussions included adding wood ash instead of purchased baking soda in food preparation, raising snails fed with corn bran and moringa leaves to make the snails more nutritious, using tapioca or rice cooking water when making juice out of cashew apple so that it does not irritate the throat so much, and growing tomatoes in plastic bags. One working group selected this last-mentioned innovation to share in more detail with the other groups because it allows farmers to increase tomato production and to recycle plastic bags that pollute the surroundings and are dangerous for grazing animals.

There was a lively discussion not only within the small groups but also when they shared their examples with each other in the plenary.

### Documenting local innovation

The next topic was documenting local innovation, including a checklist of things to observe and include in the description. Among the points that participants raised for discussion were



what can be done if some innovators do not want their innovations to be documented and issues related to intellectual property rights. It was made clear that the innovators themselves need to want to share their innovations with others and to be involved in the documentation process. They need to be given due credit for their achievements. The documentation puts the innovations in the public domain, which provides protection against theft of intellectual property. Moreover, most local innovations in agroecology and natural resource management are not inventions totally new to the world but rather better ways of using locally available resources. Indeed, most farmers are happy to share their new ideas within and beyond their communities and are proud to be recognised in public as innovators.

The participants then discussed further in their small groups, using the examples they had chosen in the previous session, how a process of identifying and documenting local innovation could be stimulated. The subsequent discussions in plenary helped improve everyone's understanding about how the documentation process serves as an entry point for appreciative interaction between, on the one hand, formal researchers and development agents and, on the other hand, small-scale farmers, especially women and young farmers. Joint documentation can lead into processes of farmer-led joint experimentation, another way of referring to PID. The documentation products – which may be in written or visual form, such as photographs or posters or video films – are also useful for disseminating information about innovations to other farmers and encouraging further local innovation.

### Promoting policy dialogue

Some of the policy briefs and other publications of the international Prolinnova network were distributed to the participants in order to further stimulate their curiosity and learning and to prepare for policy dialogue aimed at mainstreaming the PID approach into agricultural research and development in Benin. Because local government



Group work during ELI-FaNS workshop in Bembéréké, Benin

Credit: Georges Djohy

polymakers and staff of agricultural advisory services and NGOs were among the participants, the workshop was a great opportunity to advocate at the local level for more interest in local innovation and PID processes.

### What did the workshop achieve?

At the end of the workshop, a quick evaluation and interviews with individuals revealed that almost all the participants felt they had gained a good understanding of the concepts of local innovation and PID and were eager to start identifying and documenting local innovation in agroecology and natural resource management.

The workshop created fertile ground for collaboration by different actors to improve food and nutrition security in farming communities by building on local knowledge and creativity. The participatory approach taken in the workshop appears to have stimulated enthusiasm and opened up space for this approach to farmer-led research and development. It was particularly inspiring to see the strong engagement

of local administrative authorities, traditional leaders and college staff, as this augurs well for mainstreaming the PID approach in research and education institutions in northern Benin.

### Footnote

*Prolinnova (Promoting Local Innovation in ecologically oriented agriculture and natural resource management) is an international multistakeholder community of practice that promotes small-scale farmers' innovation in agroecology and their leadership in participatory research and development.*

### Authors

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