

## STORY

### **The functions of facilitation in multi-stakeholder learning: lessons learned from capacity development on value chains management in innovation platforms in Burkina Faso and Ghana**

*Jean-Joseph Cadilhon*

Innovation platforms are groups of individuals or stakeholder representatives with different backgrounds and interests. They come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities, and find ways to achieve their goals. When innovation platforms are set up by development projects, their processes are usually facilitated by the support organization. This short story presents how the author's facilitation allowed the multiple stakeholders within local community innovation platforms supported by a project in Ghana and Burkina Faso to share experiences and knowledge so as to develop their respective capacities in value chains' management and analysis. The main lesson from this story is that when facilitation by the support organization effectively supports learning processes by the stakeholders, it helps bring about recognition that commitment and communication are essential to help smallholders benefit from value chains and the subsequent engagement of all stakeholders in a continuous learning process. In time, the members of the innovation platform will take the responsibility to carry out further knowledge sharing activities without project support.

Keywords: multi-stakeholder processes; learning; innovation platforms; development projects; value chains; small farmers; Burkina Faso; Ghana

The Volta2 Project is helping smallholder farmers adopt new agricultural and water management practices for more productive crop-livestock agro-ecosystems in the Volta river basin in Burkina Faso and Northern Ghana (Challenge Program on Water and Food, CPWF In press). The three-year-long project is expected to achieve the following development outcomes, among others:

1. Understanding how institutions and market incentives shape the reality of interventions;
2. Strengthening linkages between different value chain actors;

### 3. Improving communication and adaptive learning.

The project team includes international research institutes from the CGIAR Consortium, national research institutes and non-governmental organizations active in both countries. They have chosen to set up multi-stakeholder innovation platforms to achieve the project's outcomes. This short story reflects on the lessons I have learned after having conducted training sessions on value chain development and analysis with two of these innovation platforms located in a rural area of Northern Ghana and in a peri-urban district of Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso.

An innovation platform is a group of individuals (who often represent organizations) with different backgrounds and interests. The members come together to diagnose problems, identify opportunities, and find ways to achieve their goals (Homann-Kee Tui et al in press). In the Volta2 project, members include crop and livestock farmers, traders and processors. Crucially, representatives from supporting institutions like farmers' organizations, micro-credit banks, the Ministry of agriculture, local scientists and input suppliers are also members of the platforms. Members may design and implement activities as a platform. In some cases, individual platform members may also initiate innovations alone after having learned from others through participating in the platform processes; the platform can then help scale out this individual innovation to reach more stakeholders.

The innovation platforms set up by the Volta2 project in both Burkina Faso and Ghana started off by facilitating the farmers' uptake of irrigation and production techniques that would help them manage their water resources better (CPWF In press). These were key activities to reach other development outcomes of the project but farmers also gained a regular marketable surplus which engendered a need for improved marketing and value chain coordination. In the third year of the project, the innovation platform meetings facilitated by the project team led to an explicit request for some capacity development on value chains management and analysis. The farmers in particular had increased their crop and livestock productions thanks to the project and had been experimenting in improving their market access. They had realized that engaging with traders and consumers required different sets of skills than those they currently had. They had also realized that to become really successful in marketing their products in a sustainable way, they needed to increase their production potential even further so as to become regular bulk suppliers. They also needed lots of ready cash for all the down-payments necessary for their products to reach markets. Their constraints had thus shifted from managing their crop and livestock production enterprises to accessing credit and creating linkages with markets (logistics, coordination, communication, capacity to locate and use new knowledge). This change of focus by stakeholders is already a first indication that the innovation platform tool had led to an increased capacity to innovate: platform members were able to look beyond the original aim of the platform; they were addressing evolving challenges and seizing emerging opportunities.

Given my expertise in value chain analysis and linking smallholder farmers to dynamic markets, the project team requested that I develop capacity development material that would be suitable for the members of the project's innovation platforms. I was also invited to implement two training workshops to test out the materials in the field in January and February 2013. I conducted the first event in English with the Ghanaian platform. This first trial allowed me to refine the training material in order to help participants understand the multi-stakeholder linkages and processes that are needed to build sustainable value chains and obtain access to credit. I then delivered the training in French to Burkinabe project stakeholders.

### **The challenges of facilitating multi-stakeholder learning**

The project team had assumed that the already existing innovation platforms set up by Volta2 were still an appropriate tool to tackle the new market-related issues of the producers involved in the project.

### **Are innovation platforms a relevant tool to facilitate joint learning in value chain development?**

I tend to agree with this assumption: facilitating access to markets and credit is a complex process and it is likely to involve all the stakeholders of the platform. If buyers were not coming spontaneously to collect produce from the Ghanaian farmers, if the Burkinabe farmers were not aware of all the credit facilities that were in theory available to them, it did make sense for the project to facilitate the coming together of all these stakeholders to discuss market and credit access issues within an innovation platform meeting. In this way, they could all develop their capacities within a value chain setting. However, an innovation platform comprising different value chain actors does not necessarily have to be a value chain platform gathering the actors of a given chain. Indeed, whereas the innovation platform in Burkina Faso involved farmers, traders and processors from the same village, and who were involved in doing business together (a value chain platform), the innovation platforms in Ghana gathered different stakeholders in agricultural value chains who came from different villages and were not involved in actual transactions together. Nonetheless, in both sites, the innovation platform allowed information to flow among the various stakeholders for knowledge sharing and joint planning. This in turn enabled producers, traders and processors to gain better access to markets (Adane et al 2013) and farmers to improve their crop and livestock productivity (Téno et al 2013).

I had developed the training curriculum to be entirely based on the sharing of prior knowledge by the participants present at the meeting. I also asked the innovation platform members to reflect on the lessons they had taken away from films I projected showcasing successful rice and onion value chain organization by a cooperative of Burkinabe producers. This learning process was based on the innovation systems perspective that it

is in fact the interaction between the different stakeholders who contribute their own knowledge and experience which will lead to knowledge sharing and capacity development. Although the training content was indigenous, the approach and design were external. The external facilitation played an essential role in the learning process because it also added expertise I knew of that may not have been available locally.

However, I discovered that this participative learning method could be challenging for some participants who were less educated, and generally speaking, in country settings where the entire education system was based on the unchallenged omniscience of the teacher and of academia. My role was therefore constantly to remind the participants that they and their peers actually knew more than I did and that I was only there to facilitate the knowledge sharing process. I guess my legitimacy as the trainer was finally grounded in the stakeholders' grasping at the end of the two days that they now understood and could undertake the key building blocks of value chain management and the key elements of value chain analysis. The facilitation had led to participants' integrating these individual building blocks which they had been discussing during the training into a holistic multi-stakeholder process that they would have to go through if they really wished to improve their access to markets and credit. Drawing a road map of the event (as helpfully suggested after the training in Ghana by Ernestine Sanogo of SNV-Ghana) and relating the different elements of the course to the objectives of the participants helped achieve this integration.

### **Can different value chain stakeholders learn together efficiently?**

Innovation platforms that are set up to tackle value chain development problems are by nature heterogeneous. They group people who do not have the same level of education or market experience. The stakeholders do not have the same business objectives: one major conflicting objective between value chain partners is that the buyer is trying to reduce prices while the seller wishes to increase prices. Finally, value chains are also characterized by varying degrees of power: larger traders are usually richer than smallholder farmers and their power to influence the discussions is increased by their wealth. Higher education can do likewise for scientists and other stakeholders present to support the value chain. The tribal chief, who was also a national farmers' representative, present during the training in Ghana also projected natural power over all the other participants due to his dominant socio-cultural position.

Facilitating this process of multi-stakeholder learning in a way in which all could participate on an equal footing was therefore a key to a successful training. I quickly found out who were the individuals likely to capture the attention of the others by their power status. It was actually helpful to acknowledge their power and have them assist in the facilitation process by asking them to solicit interventions from other participants that may complement or differ from their own.

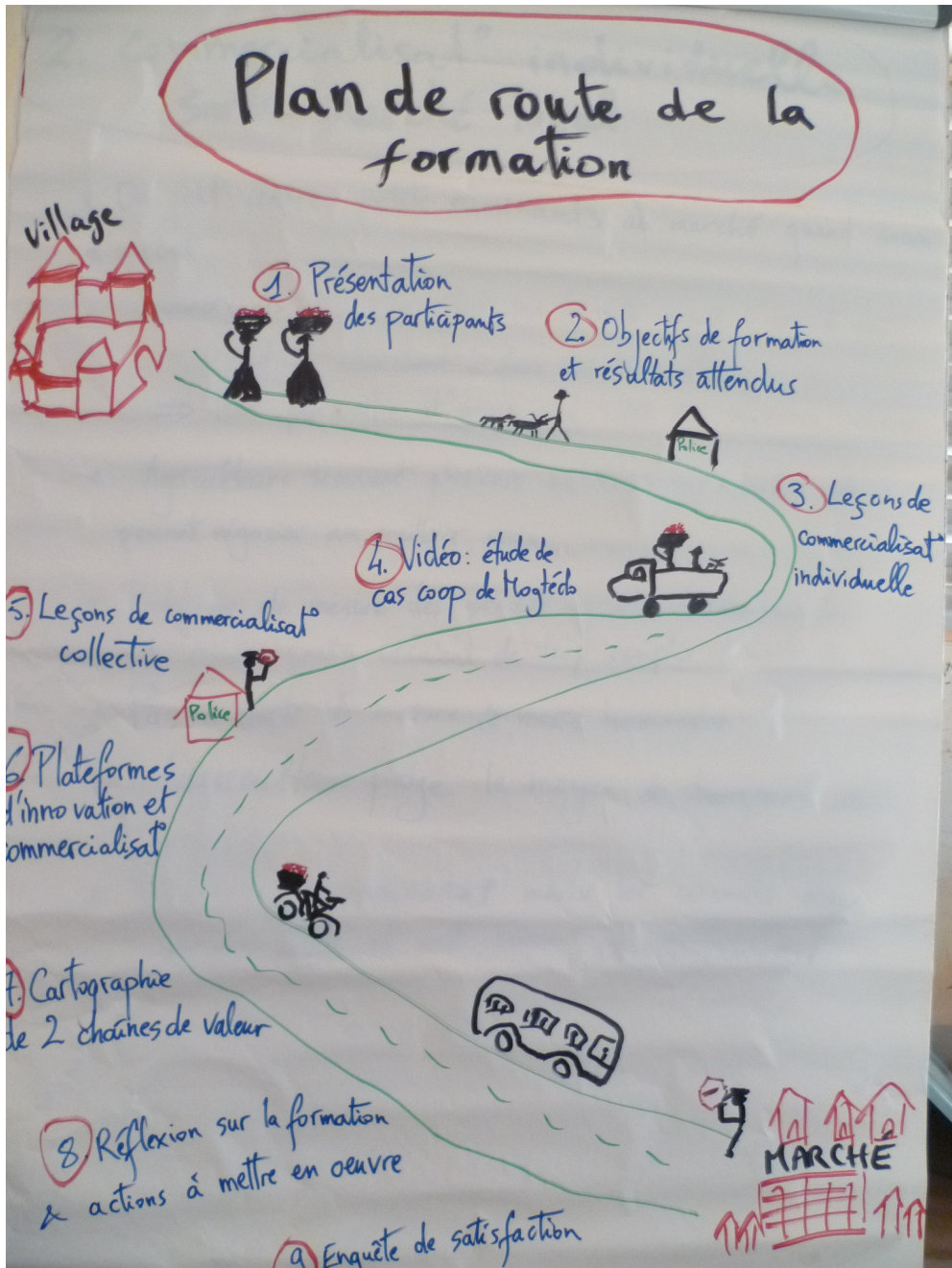
It was more challenging to engage the women participants. The gender balance was 1/3 women, 2/3 men in Ghana. Still, the majority of the women would not share their own knowledge or experience in public with the entire group, unless invited to do so. However, I noticed they participated more actively in smaller heterogeneous group discussions focusing on the lessons they had learned from the videos of farmers successfully organizing their value chain. Structured smaller group discussions focusing on a given topic can therefore help women share their thoughts with other value chain stakeholders.

Nonetheless, even the small group method did not seem to work in the training in Burkina Faso where there were only two women within the group of 30 participants. Both of them were small-scale traders whose task it was to go to the city markets in order to collect market information and share it with other members of the platform. They remained silent most of the time; when invited to share their thoughts they said they had none. When asked to project themselves into another stakeholder's shoes, they said they were content with the role the other platform members had assigned to them. During the lunch break they dutifully served food to all the other participants before eating themselves. There was nothing I could do to break this strong socio-cultural fact and it would probably have been counterproductive to try to do so. I can only hope that these two market ladies did indeed learn something from the event and subsequently went home to share their new knowledge with their peers.

### **Facilitating and monitoring follow-up activities in value chain development**

The project team wanted to make sure that the capacity development event would actually lead to commitments by the platform members to start developing their value chains or taking the necessary administrative steps to access credit. After having reviewed the lessons learned from the participants' past experiences of individual and group marketing, the participants discussed what improvements in marketing they had achieved through the innovation platform. The platform members then proceeded to map two commodity value chains they were involved in. Finally, Step number 8 in the training process illustrated in the training road map above allowed participants to reflect on what they had learned from the event and, crucially, what they planned to do to start putting it into practice. The facilitation process was once again needed here to help the participants share the lessons they had learned and their business plans with one another. The project team then reminded the participants that they would be asked to share the status of their progress at the next and final platform meeting within the Volta2 lifetime. This meeting is due to be held end of September 2013 after the writing of this story so there is still no indication of the behavioural and attitudinal changes brought by the capacity development event. This is probably one major limitation of the capacity development method used here. One-off events like this one will probably do little to enhance knowledge and change the behaviour of stakeholders. Applied learning and continuous engagement could have been introduced for better results. With the training material now

in the hands of the project partners in the field, learning events could be broken down into small modules with some time left in between sessions for participants to apply the concepts in their professional environment, ideally accompanied with some mentoring or peer support.



Photograph 1: Training map

Nonetheless, it was encouraging to hear the platform members in both Ghana and Burkina Faso decide that they wanted to take the necessary steps so as to formalize their group into an appropriate legal entity which would allow them to gain access to credit. They also pledged to keep facilitating such multi-stakeholder discussions on value chain development themselves without the help of the project. It seems they had grasped the power of the innovation platform tool to facilitate such multi-stakeholder learning around value chain development. If I had one message to share with readers of this story, it is that multi-stakeholder commitment and communications along a value chain are a prerequisite for smallholders to reach benefits in upgrading their production and marketing systems. Facilitation helps bring about recognition of this and subsequent engagement by value chain actors who can take over the process.

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