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Science-Policy-Practice Interfaces in Agricultural Innovations in Africa: Moving beyond the Traditional Boundaries of Doing Science

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Abstract

Agricultural innovation pathways have developed since the beginning of the 20th century from the linear model of transferring knowledge, technologies and practices from ‘sources’ (universities, research centres) to ‘receivers’ bridged through the extension system to the current approach of joint collaboration between stakeholders. However, there are no sufficient guidelines on how scientists can effectively engage with policy makers in research and knowledge sharing. Within the BMBF-funded BiomassWeb project (www.biomassweb.org), we aimed at filling this cooperation gap through research-policy-practice interfaces (RPPI) based on the concepts of transdisciplinarity and research for development (R4D) continuum. The research process followed four main stages to create RPPI: (1) BiomassWeb researchers formed (interconnected) teams along the chains of production, processing and marketing biomass-based products in selected sub-Saharan African countries (Ethiopia, Ghana and Nigeria); (2) researchers participated in training workshops on participatory research methods; (3) workshops were organised for the researchers to evaluate and collate lessons learned from their practice of participatory methods; (4) BiomassWeb research findings were shared, among others, through science-policy dialogues. On the one hand, researchers were required during the evaluation workshops to reflect on their approaches to interactions with stakeholders and adapt their approaches to the contexts during the research and, on the other hand, broaden the channel of communicating scientific knowledge in a way understandable to policy makers. The knowledge sharing during the science-policy dialogue has led to jointly identifying and reflecting on the mechanisms to address concerns of policy makers and practitioners to implement the findings. The need for continuous research to address some of the problems that arise in the process of implementation has also been recognised by both researchers and policy makers. Therefore, without undermining the role of universities and research centres in knowledge and technology production, we argue that universities can engage with policy makers through stakeholder participation, science-policy dialogue, providing evidence continuously and facilitating the process of learning lessons for successful implementation of agricultural innovations in Africa.

Keywords: Innovation communication, R4D, transdisciplinarity