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“Resilience of agricultural systems against crises”

## Joint Learning to Enhance Innovation Systems in African Agriculture

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### Abstract

Recognition is growing that strong and dynamic innovation systems are essential for adaptation to the rapid changes being experienced by smallholder farmers, including growing population pressure on limited natural resources and climate change. Yet relatively little is documented about how innovation processes unfold in smallholder agriculture. Most researchers, development practitioners and policymakers implicitly or explicitly work with a linear model of transfer of “innovations” from research via extension to farmers for adoption. This seldom reflects how innovation actually happens. Recent studies have revealed that effective innovation takes place within heterogeneous networks of researchers, farmers, private entrepreneurs, NGOs, government and other stakeholders who interact over time in a non-linear, iterative and non-predictable fashion to solve a pressing problem, adapt to new conditions or take advantage of new opportunities. The outcome of such interactions usually consists of a mix of technical, organisational and institutional innovations developed and refined “on the go” – often quite different from what the initiators envisaged.

The EU-funded project JOLISAA (Joint Learning in Innovation Systems in African Agriculture) is assessing recent or ongoing cases of innovation in smallholder agriculture in Benin, Kenya and South Africa, as a basis for identifying lessons about the conditions that favour or impede innovation processes. From their inventory of diverse cases, JOLISAA partners have selected some lessons-rich-cases for deeper analysis. Together with the actors involved in these cases, a collaborative assessment is made of how the innovation process unfolded, the roles and contributions of the different actors and the nature of linkages between them. Special attention is given to the contributions of smallholders to the process. The collaborative assessment is meant to provide lessons not only for the people directly involved in the cases but also more generally for policymakers, researchers and development practitioners, about how to support effective innovation processes that strengthen the knowledge, creativity and linkages of the smallholders themselves. This should render them more resilient to rapid and even sudden changes. The paper presents highlights and challenges related to the methodology as well as initial lessons drawn from the inventory and assessment of innovation cases.

**Keywords:** Agricultural innovation systems, local knowledge, smallholders