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Innovation Platforms at Work: Supporting the Transition to Agroecological Farming in Nicaragua

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Abstract

How can processes of innovation towards sustainable intensification, particularly among smallholders, best be supported? Farmer-led experimentation and innovation processes are central to increasing food security among smallholders worldwide, especially in the knowledge-intensive realms of sustainable intensification and agroecological farming. Research and development streams have recognised that successful innovation is a co-evolutionary process, in which technological change occurs with related social and institutional change. Territorial Innovation platforms (IPs), consisting of key actors in a territory (eg. farmers' organisations, cooperatives, government institutions, NGOs) have increasingly focused on brokering interactions among actors in the agricultural innovation system (AIS). The 'mixed crop-livestock-tree' IP in Estelí, Nicaragua is an example of such an IP. One goal of the IP is to bring together organisations that work with local smallholders on sustainably intensifying their production systems through agroecological methods. To provide empirical evidence of how such an intervention progresses, this study used quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the composition and activities of the 'mixed crop-livestock-tree' IP, investigating how it performs its functions based on Kilelu et al.'s work on brokering innovation processes. This highlights the importance of brokerage between different AIS actors in co-evolutionary innovation processes, without losing sight of the central importance of smallholders' needs. An analysis of the sub-functions associated with each function demonstrates that the IP has succeeded well in filling the functions network brokerage, innovation process management, and demand articulation. The functions institutional support, capacity building, and knowledge brokering are weakly executed. The scaling up of agroecological practices could be better supported by strengthening the execution of the latter functions, and through a concerted alignment of all functions. Results emphasise that to support the co-evolutionary scaling of innovations, IP functions should be synergistic. This study underscores the importance of functional analyses to highlight obstructions to IPs' satisfying their full potential as brokers in innovation processes.

Keywords: Adoption, agroecology, co-evolutionary innovation, functional analysis, knowledge brokerage