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Learning processes to foster ‘localised’ innovation in food and farming systems

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Abstract

Food and agriculture systems are human activity systems that are created, maintained and continuously changed, adapted and developed by “real” actors through their activities. Research that engages these actors in collaborative learning processes can pave the way for effective “localisation” of innovations.

The term “local” is used here to emphasise the contextuality of innovations, i.e. their validity within a particular local configuration that is influenced by environmental, economic and social conditions, by management strategies and techniques, by organisational forms, normative ideas and other factors. Exploring the contextual factors that need to be considered when trying to make innovation ‘work’ in a particular situation requires a variety of approaches, knowledge and skills.

In our work with the late Dr Anja Christinck, we conceptualised and used collaborative learning to systematically ‘localise’ or ‘contextualise’ innovations so that they become meaningful and relevant to real world actors in their respective local contexts. In this paper, we show that different types of innovations need to be contextualised to different degrees, depending on whether a first, second or third learning loop is required to integrate an innovation into an activity system.

Effective contextualisation of innovation processes must start with the identification of all relevant actors in a human activity system and their clearly defined active participation in the collaborative research process. The knowledge of the different actors is integrated, i.e. explicit knowledge is shared and an attempt is made to make explicit tacit knowledge that is normally embedded in activities and processes. Co-creation of knowledge can be achieved by experimenting with new technological options, processes or organisational structures in the local context so that new knowledge is put into practice. Conceptualising this process helps to advance the scientific understanding of innovation processes in food and farming systems.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, contextualisation, innovation, low external input systems