LEARNING BRIEF

3

DeSIRA LIFT

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Actionable learning from a review of **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration for Agricultural Innovation in DeSIRA**

Table of contents

Acronyms

CC-SNIA	inter-ministerial coordination unit in Burkina Faso (Access Project)
COM-B	Capabilities, Opportunities, and Motivation model for Behavioural change
DeSIRA	Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture
DeSIRA-LIFT	Leveraging the DeSIRA Initiative for Agri-food Systems Transformation
MSP	multistakeholder platforms
NGO	non-governmental organization

Executive Summary

Agricultural innovation in developing countries increasingly confronts challenges of complexity that transcend the capacity of any single organisation. The DeSIRA Initiative, funded by the European Commission, has invested in collaborative approaches that bring together research institutions, government agencies, farmer organisations, private sector entities, and civil society in various configurations of collaborative platforms. This learning review examined eight diverse case studies to understand what makes these collaborative platforms effective.

The case studies revealed four distinct types of collaborative platforms, each addressing different needs in agricultural innovation systems:

1. Connectors that bridge communities with centres of power and resources
2. Policy platforms that focus on policy change and scaling
3. Power brokers that address competing interests and power imbalances blocking innovation
4. Knowledge integrators that bring together scientific expertise and local wisdom

Analysis across these different platforms, guided by an analytical framework inspired by the Capabilities, Opportunities, and Motivation model for Behavioural change (COM-B), reveals that successful collaboration emerges not from rushing to show quick results but from deliberate investment in three interconnected domains: building collaborative capabilities, enhancing opportunities for engagement and resource access, and continuously reaffirming the legitimacy of the collaborative process and its outcomes.

The COM-B elements work together synergistically—improved capabilities help stakeholders better recognise and act on opportunities, while positive experiences strengthen motivation for continued engagement. Practical benefits (or the expectation thereof) for all stakeholders drive sustained engagement, whilst trust in the collaborative process is critical for overcoming differences and negotiating trade-offs. Successful collaboration requires deliberate investment in developing facilitation skills and relationship-building capabilities. Working through existing structures, rather than creating parallel systems, proves more sustainable, while governance mechanisms must balance clarity with flexibility.

Prioritising the building of strong collaborative foundations is key for future projects while maintaining flexibility to adapt to local contexts. Success requires recognising collaboration as a core element of project design and implementation, not merely as an enabling factor. For project designers, this means building in adequate time and resources for relationship development before expecting technical outputs. For implementers, it suggests focusing on building trust and developing shared understanding before advancing technical activities. For donors, it highlights the importance of allowing sufficient time for foundation building and recognising the value of process alongside results. For policymakers, it underscores the need to create enabling environments that support sustainable collaboration beyond individual project cycles.

Background

DeSIRA-LIFT developed a Learning Review approach to understand what, why and how changes were generated by the DeSIRA Initiative.

The overall logics of intervention of the DeSIRA initiative is based on the promotion of international research and innovation (R&I) through project-based approaches within an agricultural innovation system (AIS) perspective as a major lever to transform agrifood systems towards more resilience and more sustainability and thus addressing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These DeSIRA R&I project partnerships are expected to deliver and scale innovations but also to contribute to deeper changes in the innovation capacities of their development partners and in national agricultural innovation systems (AIS) of the countries. DeSIRA promotes new ways of innovating, more inclusive, open and responsible, to better place research and community-driven innovation at the heart of the response to sustainability challenges.

However, R&I projects work differently in different contexts and through different change mechanisms. Therefore, R&I projects cannot be simply replicated from one context to another and expected to achieve the same outcomes automatically. Theory-based understanding about 'what works for whom, in what context, and how' is, however, transferable.

In this perspective, the Learning Reviews conducted by DeSIRA-LIFT aim at reviewing with DeSIRA project teams 'What worked for whom, in what circumstances and how?' in six areas that we considered as key mechanisms of change:

- Projects' contributions to the formation of innovation portfolios for sustainability transitions
- Projects' contributions to the development of innovation scaling strategies
- Projects' contributions to multistakeholder innovation mechanisms
- Projects' contribution to policy change
- Projects' contributions to systemic changes in the context of agroecological transitions

The Learning Review consists in a process of exploring with DeSIRA project teams what they achieved and why, using guiding learning questions that interest them. The Learning Review process encourages the development of a range of learning 'products' that are tailored to the needs of those involved: learning briefs including guiding tool such as reference Theory of Change, how-to-brief providing practical guidance for DeSIRA managers and datasets to improve decision-making. The benefit of the Learning Review work is that it provides practical knowledge to project designers and managers, as well as donors.

Leaders training cartographic tools for governance. San Jose. 2023. Photo Norángela Varga

Approach to Learning about Collaboration Platforms

The learning review presents an in-depth analysis of selected collaboration platforms developed under the DeSIRA initiative to facilitate partnerships and cooperation amongst diverse actors. Innovation requires collaboration among different actors who may benefit from collaboration but also have different stakes. The review sought to understand how these platforms foster and sustain collaboration to achieve their goals. In other words, how did the partners in various DeSIRA projects collaborate to realise innovation and how did they view success? What lessons can we draw across various initiatives that may be helpful in design of future programmes?

The review process was guided by the following learning questions:

1. What type of diversity in collaboration platforms do we see?
2. Why do people and organisations engage in collaborative platforms? Why do they set up and join these mechanisms?
3. What enables and challenges collaboration in these platforms? How does collaboration in these platforms foster innovation?
4. How do partners know that collaborative platforms are working? What are the evaluation criteria for collaboration?

Analytical Framework

Trust and Legitimacy: The Foundations of Effective Collaboration

When organisations and individuals decide to work together they are driven by a complex array of motivations, chief among them being "legitimacy"—the perception that collaboration is an appropriate, effective, and justified approach to addressing their needs (Bäckstrand, 2005). One fundamental aspect is instrumental or "output" legitimacy—the belief that collaboration offers viable means to satisfy stakeholders' needs or protect their interests (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Scharpf, 1999). This pragmatic view focuses on the anticipated benefits and returns on investment that partners expect to gain through working together rather than pursuing their goals independently.

Alongside this is "procedural legitimacy," which concerns the fairness and inclusivity of the collaborative process itself (Horan, 2019; Koski et al., 2018; Scharpf, 1999). This dimension addresses questions about how the partnership is initiated, developed and maintained, emphasising aspects such as transparent decision-making, equitable participation, and adherence to shared values.

COM-B

While legitimacy provides motivation, the COM-B model for behavioural change, as described by Michie et al. (2011), suggests that successful collaboration requires two additional critical elements. Firstly, stakeholders need appropriate capabilities—the knowledge, skills and expertise necessary for effective partnership. These might include negotiation abilities, systems thinking, or technical knowledge relevant to the shared challenge. Secondly, collaboration requires suitable opportunities—the resources, authority and contextual conditions that enable joint work. These could encompass adequate funding, supportive organisational policies, or favourable regulatory environments. The COM-B model provides a useful framework for understanding how behaviour change occurs through the interaction of capabilities (C), opportunities (O) and motivation (M). This model has been increasingly adopted in impact evaluation and contribution analysis approaches (Mayne, 2021).

Capabilities

For multistakeholder collaboration to effectively drive change, they need to strengthen both psychological and physical capabilities of stakeholders. Psychological capability involves having the necessary knowledge, understanding and skills to engage in desired behaviours. In the context of development programs, this often means building stakeholders' technical knowledge, analytical abilities, and capacity for collaboration. Physical capability relates to having the practical skills and physical resources needed to implement changes.

Opportunities

The opportunity dimension encompasses both physical and social opportunities that make behaviour change possible. Physical opportunities include making necessary resources, tools and infrastructure available. Social opportunities involve creating supportive cultural norms, relationships and institutional arrangements.

Motivation

The motivation component includes both reflective motivation (involving evaluations and plans) and automatic motivation (involving emotions and impulses). Multistakeholder collaboration need to build compelling rationales while also generating emotional buy-in and commitment.

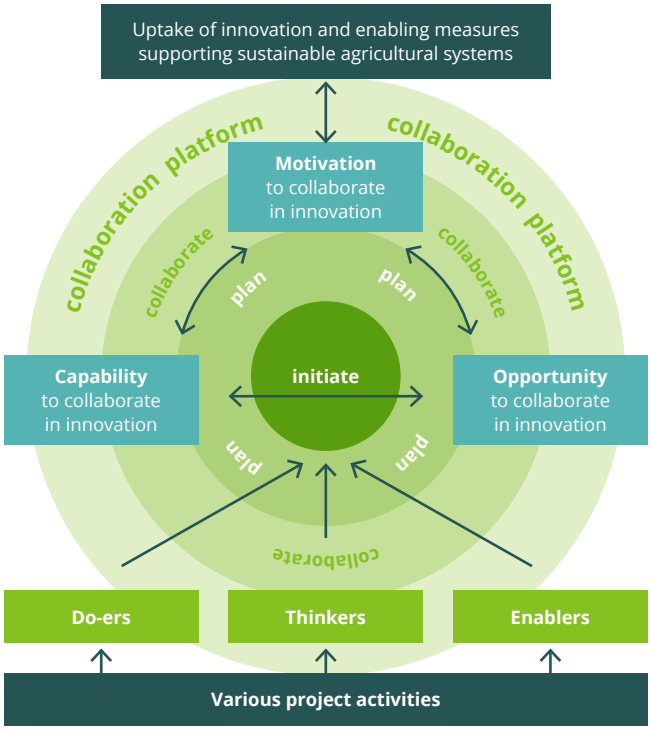
Do-ers, Thinkers, and Enablers

We categorised various types of stakeholders involved in collaborative platforms into three groups: Do-ers, Thinkers, and Enablers (Froebrich and Groot, 2023). Organisations directly implementing and developing innovation are labelled 'Do-ers'. 'Thinkers' refer to research organisations involved in design of innovations and think tanks supporting policy makers. 'Enablers' are typically government and financiers or donors. These categories are not necessarily mutually exclusive as actors may have mixed roles in innovation processes.

Phases of collaboration

We also distinguish between development phases of collaborative platforms. Following Brouwer et al. (2019), we describe these as the initiation phase, planning phase and collaboration phase. During these phases different the C-O-M for collaborative engagement develop and change. Figure 1 provides a visualisation of the COM elements and the phases in establishing collaborative platforms.

Figure 1. Capabilities, Opportunities, and Motivation of Do-ers, Thinkers, and Enablers in collaboration platforms



The Learning Review Process

The learning review employed a carefully structured methodology involving a cross-sectional study based on selected case studies.The case studies were selected through an iterative process. From an initial list of 70 projects, some of which had several examples of collaboration, we made an initial list of 40 projects that reflected:

- Different geographical regions and scales (national, regional, and multi-country)
- Diverse issues and policy areas
- Different levels of platforms
- Different levels of policy change

The intention of this selection process was to prioritise cases that would offer rich opportunities for comparison and contrast across several key variables. We then overlaid case studies that had been selected for the policy learning review, the agroecology learning review, and the DeSIRA Stories of Change to identify where detailed information already existed. This brought the list down to approximately twenty case studies. Further selection considered their potential to provide insights concerning the key learning questions, the possibility for triangulation of insights, and their contribution to an attractive diversity in cases and contexts. The final eight cases were chosen based on their readiness for participation, including willingness among key partners and availability of relevant people and project documentation.

A dialogue approach was designed to enable people directly involved in facilitating the case studies to narrate "their story" following guidelines aligned with the analytical framework. The guidelines focused on identifying and describing key factors that influenced the perceived success of collaboration by examining how the collaboration platform helped people develop and use capabilities, opportunities and motivation to collaborate towards their shared stakes and own interests.

Triangulation, including eliciting different perspectives and reviewing documentation, provided further insights and confirmation. For each case study, the review team conducted interviews with the project leader and in most cases representatives of different partner organisations. In some instances, two or three dialogue interviews were conducted. Each case study was written up and shared with all the interviewees to ensure that they accurately reflected their various perspectives.

These case studies were then reviewed to identify and draw out key themes and factors that tended to be more or less important in different contexts. The methodology thus combined case selection, in-depth stakeholder engagement through dialogue interviews, and systematic analysis to generate insights into effective collaboration for agricultural innovation.

Table 1. The 8 case studies. See here for more information on the DeSIRA projects: https://padlet.com/Service_DeSIRA_LIFT/map-of-desira-projects-sfobq0vm3ufutgz8

Project	Countries	Project purpose		
ACCESS	**Burkina Faso**	The specific objective is to contribute to a more efficient national agricultural innovation system. The project introduces new support approaches for innovators and providers of innovation support services (see below) in the following areas: agro-food processing, agroecology, and digital agriculture. It operates at multiple levels. At the micro level, it supports two types of innovation carriers: Multi-actor Innovation Partnerships (PIMs) and innovative entrepreneurs. By applying new support approaches to existing innovation processes carried out by PIMs and entrepreneurs, it contributes to the development of innovations for use by smallholder farmers and private actors in food value chains.		
LIPS-ZIM	**Zimbabwe**	The project aims to promote and scale up climate-adapted, cost-efficient, and science-based livestock production systems, and to reduce climate change-related diseases causing lower productivity and higher livestock mortality		
IRRINN	**Burkina Faso**	The project promotes two types of small irrigation systems: supplemental irrigation from Runoff Water Collection Basins (BCER) and Smallholder Private Irrigation (PIP). It aims to identify and promote effective solutions to overcome the main obstacles to the adoption of these irrigation techniques.		
IDEAS	**Colombia**	The project aims to strengthen participatory local governance and sustainable production with innovative data management systems and scientific knowledge in two municipalities.		
CLIMA LOCA	**Colombia, Ecuador, Peru**	The project aims at reducing the vulnerability of smallholder cocoa producers to the impacts of new food safety regulation (including a new EU regulation for Cadmium -Cd- in cacao) and climate change.		
Sustenta & Inova	**Brazil** *In three distinct territories in the state of Pará:*	**Marajó Island** is known for its complex ecosystems and the presence of traditional communities; activities aim at landscape restoration and sustainable business development.	**Xingu** (Transamazônica): in this area, the project focuses on improving the livelihoods of family farmers through sustainable practices, agroforestry systems, and efforts to increase market access.	**Capim River** (Belém-Brasília Highway): activities revolve around policy support, sustainable agro-industrial practices, and innovative business initiatives, engaging cooperatives and rural enterprises.
WEFA / FO-RI	**Tanzania** *The project supports two action-research partnerships*	*Partnerships are carried out by farmers' organisations, with technical support from agricultural agencies and research bodies, which design, test and disseminate innovations based on agroecological principles.*	**Partnership 1:** Agroecological practices were tested for sunflower cultivation: use of farmyard manure, intercropping and use of indigenous sunflower varieties, rich in oil content.	**Partnership 1:** Experiments focus on the effects of biochar (i.e. a form of charcoal primarily used as a soil amendment) on beans, avocado, and macadamia and on the use of gliricidia trees (nitrogen-fixing trees) to complement maize, beans and sunflower
ESSA	**Ethiopia and Kenya**	The project aims to advance climate-smart agro-pastoral systems through increased scientific knowledge, strengthened national agricultural innovation systems, and frameworks for sustainable livelihood transitions. Project partners develop digital-based innovations for decision making at farm level, but also at territorial level with new Earth observation methods for monitoring Tree-Based Systems Disturbance (TBSD) in a mosaic landscape.		

Table 2. Case study actor details

Actors in DeSIRA Multi-stakeholder Collaboration Mechanisms:	
ACCESS (Burkina Faso)	
State actors	• National Center for Scientific and Technological Research (CNRST) - Research institution • Ministry of Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation (MESRSI) • Ministère de l'Agriculture et des Aménagements Hydro-agricoles- (MAAH) • Cellule de Coordination du Système National d'Innovation Agricole -CC-SNIA • Agence Nationale de Valorisation des Résultats de la Recherche et des Innovations (ANVAR) • Direction Générale de la Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation (DGRSI) • Direction générale de l'Enseignement supérieur (DGSUP) • Direction Générale de la Promotion de l'Économie Rurale -(DGPER)
International research and development organisations	• Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD) ; Project leader • Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations FAO's Office of Innovation
Private sector	• La Fabrique (social business incubator) • Expert Synergy Consulting (ESC) • Afric'Innov • Fédération des industries agro-alimentaires du Burkina (FIAB)
Academic institutions	• Centre D'Etudes, De Documentation Et De Recherche Économiques et Sociales (CEDRES) • Université de Ouagadougou
Community-based organisations	• Women rice processors group • Milk value chain partnership • Farmer cooperatives
LIPS-ZIM (Zimbabwe)	
State actors	• Department of Veterinary Services (DVS) • Government extension workers • Provincial and district authorities • Government monitoring team (comprising officials from communications, economics, veterinary services, and research) • Rural District Councils
International research organisations	• International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) - Project leader
Private sector	• Livestock traders • Livestock market operators • Input suppliers • Feed manufacturing companies
Community-based organisations	• Farmer groups in nine districts • Traditional leaders • Women's groups involved in livestock production
NGOs	• Various NGOs participating in Innovation Platforms

Table 2. Case study actor details

Actors in DeSIRA Multi-stakeholder Collaboration Mechanisms:	
IRRINN (Burkina Faso)	
State actors	• Government extension officers • Municipal authorities
International research organisations	• Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD); Project leader • Spanish National Research Council (CSIC) • Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF)
National research institutions	• Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (EMBRAPA) • Environmental Institute for Agricultural Research (INERA)
Private sector	• Equipment suppliers for solar irrigation systems • Microfinance institutions
Academic institutions	• International Institute for Water and Environmental Engineering (2iE)
NGOs	• Action pour la Promotion de l'Entrepreneuriat et des Systèmes d'Irrigation (APESI) • Practica
Community-based organisations	• Farmer groups around Ouagadougou • Village-level innovation platform members • Individual farmers (e.g., in Kouzoughin village)
IDEAS (Colombia)	
State actors	• Municipal environmental secretariats • Departmental authorities • National ministries • Natural resource management agencies
International research organisations	• Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD), • ONF Andina
Academic institutions	• Pontificia Universidad Javeriana • Wageningen University and Research
Community-based organisations	• Indigenous communities • Farmers' associations • Local community members • Former FARC combatants
Private sector	• Mining operators • Cattle ranchers • Local businesses
NGOs	• ONF International (through its Colombian branch ONF Andina) - Project leader • Environmental NGOs

Table 2. Case study actor details

Actors in DeSIRA Multi-stakeholder Collaboration Mechanisms:	
CLIMA LOCA (Colombia, Ecuador, Perú)	
State actors	• Government representatives from three countries • Agricultural ministries • Environmental agencies • Food safety regulators
International research organisations	• International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) - Project leader
National research institutions	• Research partners across Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru • National agricultural research institutes
Academic institutions	• Universities in all three countries
Private sector	• Chocolate makers • Cocoa exporters • NORANDINO cooperative (Peru) • Feed manufacturing companies
Community-based organisations	• Cocoa farmer cooperatives • Smallholder farmer groups
Regional bodies	• EU Delegations in all three countries • External Advisory Committee including government and industry representatives
Sustenta & Inova (Brazil)	
State actors	• Municipal environmental secretariats • State government of Pará • Federal government agencies • State Council of Sustainable Rural Development
Private sector	• SEBRAE PARÁ (Service for Support of Micro and Small Business) - Project leader • Banco da Amazônia • Conexsus Institute • Local businesses
International research organisations	• Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD)
National research institutions	• Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (EMBRAPA) • Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM)
Community-based organisations	• Quilombola communities • Other indigenous groups • Community associations • Cooperatives • Local facilitators as knowledge multipliers • Agro-extractivists (approximately 4,000 families across 17 municipalities)
NGOs	• Fundação Arthur Bernardes (FUNARBE) • Climate Champions Team • TED Countdown • Leaders' Quest

Table 2. Case study actor details

Actors in DeSIRA Multi-stakeholder Collaboration Mechanisms:	
WEFA (Tanzania) / FO-RI	
State actors	• Government officials • Tanzania Agricultural Research Institute (TARI) • Traditional authorities • Extension officers
NGOs	• We Effect (Swedish cooperative organization) - Project leader
Community-based organisations	• Mtandao wa Vikundi vya Wakulima Mkoa wa Arusha - MVIWAARUSHA (local network of farmers and pastoralists) • Farmer groups in Monduli, Karatu, and Arusha DC • Women farmers (more than half of 4,200 participants) • Male champions • Model couples • 60 lead farmer researchers (38 women, 22 men)
Private sector	• Local businesses • Market actors
International	• Part of larger FO-RI initiative spanning 17 countries
ESSA (Ethiopia and Kenya)	
Academic institutions	• University of Helsinki - Project leader • University of Nairobi • Addis Ababa University
International research organisations	• International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) • International Centre of Insect Physiology and Ecology (ICIPE)
Regional research centres	• Ethiopian Agricultural Research Council Secretariat (EARCS) • Regional Centre for Mapping of Resources for Development (RCMRD)
National research institutions	• Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO)
Community-based organisations	• Pastoralist households • Local colleges • Agricultural offices
State actors	• Ministry representatives from both countries • Environmental authorities • Agricultural extension services

Key Differences Across Projects

1. **Leadership type:** Projects are led by different types of organisations:
   - International research organisations (CIRAD for ACCESS and IRRINN, ILRI for LIPS-ZIM, CIAT for CLIMA LOCA)
   - Academic institutions (University of Helsinki for ESSA)
   - Private sector (SEBRAE PARÁ for Sustenta & Inova)
   - NGOs (We Effect for WEFA, ONF International for IDEAS)

2. **Geographic scope:**
   - National focus (LIPS-ZIM, IRRINN, ACCESS)
   - Regional/multi-country (CLIMA LOCA across three countries, ESSA across two countries)
   - Sub-national focus (IDEAS in specific Colombian territories, Sustenta & Inova in Amazon regions)
   - Local focus (WEFA in specific Tanzanian districts)

3. **Community engagement approach:**
   - Direct farmer leadership (WEFA with majority women researchers)
   - Community-managed centres (Sustenta & Inova with reference centres)
   - Dual-level platforms (LIPS-ZIM with district and village level structures)
   - Science-driven with community implementation (ESSA)

4. **State involvement:**
   - High-level policy integration (ACCESS establishing inter-ministerial unit)
   - Working through government extension services (LIPS-ZIM)
   - Post-conflict governance (IDEAS in Colombia)
   - Cross-border government coordination (CLIMA LOCA)

5. **Private sector integration:**
   - Market development focus (LIPS-ZIM with traders)
   - Financial institution involvement (Sustenta & Inova with banking partnerships)
   - Value chain approach (CLIMA LOCA with chocolate makers and exporters)
   - Technology suppliers (IRRINN with irrigation equipment providers)

Findings

Diversity in Collaborative Platforms

The cases studied proved to represent a rich diversity of collaboration platforms in various context[2]. Each of these cases offered valuable insights into different aspects of multi-stakeholder collaboration, from technical innovation to institutional transformation, and from market development to gender inclusion. This variation was useful for identifying common elements in collaboration across the cases and to extract overarching insights.

These have been subsequently classified into four broad categories:

a. **Connectors** - Collaborative platforms that connect community members to centres of power and resources. Through innovation platforms, reference centres and nested governance structures, these projects bridge gaps between marginalised communities and financial resources, technical support and policy influence. They are further characterised as adopting approaches to experimentation, implementation and scaling of innovations—particularly in developing financial mechanisms within value chain. By creating spaces where diverse stakeholders can engage in dialogue, share knowledge and collectively develop solutions, these collaborative platforms build trust while enabling communities to access resources and influence that might otherwise remain beyond their reach – IRRINN (Burkina Faso) and Sustenta & Inova (Brazil).

b. **Policy platforms** - Collaborative platforms that operate at different levels with a focus on policy change and scaling. These employ nested platform structures that connect local implementation with higher-level policy processes, though they do so through different mechanisms tailored to their specific contexts. They create deliberate linkages between local implementation and higher-level policy processes; work through and strengthen existing institutional structures; employ co-development approaches that ensure government ownership; and build capabilities for sustained collaboration beyond project funding – ACCESS (Burkina Faso), LIPS-ZIM (Zimbabwe) and CLIMA LOCA (Colombia, Ecuador, Peru).

c. **Power brokers** - Collaborative platforms focused on addressing competing interests and power dynamics that block innovation. These might operate at different levels: at the community and territorial level (in post-conflict settings), or at the household level (on transforming gender power dynamics). They explicitly recognise how power imbalances affect collaborative processes including competing interests over resources; invest in building capabilities that enable marginalised groups to participate more effectively; create neutral spaces where traditional power dynamics can be renegotiated; and pay attention to both formal and informal sources of power - IDEAS (Colombia) and WEFA (Tanzania).

d. **Knowledge integrators** - Collaborative platforms that provide science-driven knowledge integration. These bring together multiple academic institutions and stakeholders around rigorous scientific inquiry while creating pathways for knowledge to influence practice and policy. This model, which characterises the ESSA (Ethiopia and Kenya) case, builds collaboration primarily through scientific relationships. It emphasises documentation and formal knowledge products like academic publications and policy briefs, and it invests in developing the next generation of researchers.

Why collaborate in platforms?

A key question of the review was: What drives individuals and organisations to invest time, resources and risk their reputation in these collaborative endeavours?

Addressing Complex Problems Together

For many participants, the most important motivating force is the prospect of addressing problems that are too complex for any single organisation to tackle alone. This relates to the notion of outcome or instrumental legitimacy of collaboration.

In the CLIMA LOCA project spanning Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, the challenge of cadmium contamination in cocoa beans—threatening farmers' livelihoods due to stringent EU regulations—created a motivational force. For the farmers in particular, this centred on improving their operations and livelihoods..

In the Sustenta & Inova project in Brazil's Amazon, motivation stems from connecting to larger sustainability goals. Participants are driven by a shared purpose centered on sustainability and improving lives in the Amazon region, giving participants a larger meaning beyond individual organizational goals.

In post-conflict Colombia, the IDEAS project revealed how motivation emerges from the desire for greater agency in territorial decision-making. For communities long excluded from meaningful participation in land-use decisions, the project's platforms offered unprecedented opportunities to influence their futures. Meanwhile, institutional actors found motivation in recognizing the practical benefits of coordination.

Most cases demonstrated how visible progress motivates continued participation. When stakeholders witnessed tangible benefits—such as improved pricing through weighing scales at markets or better animal health through enhanced disease surveillance in LIPS-ZIM—their commitment to collaborative processes deepened substantially.

Fair processes

Beyond tangible outcomes, procedural legitimacy—the fairness and transparency of the collaborative process—was also a key motivator. In LIP-ZIM, open discussions on market pricing transformed adversarial relationships into cooperative ones. When stakeholders had access to objective information and spaces for open dialogue, they moved beyond suspicion toward collective problem-solving. This approach demonstrates how transparency serves as a foundation for trust, and trust as a foundation for collaboration. Similarly, ESSA maintained engagement through structured documentation of meetings and decisions, ensuring transparency in collaborative processes.

Fair distribution of benefits further sustained motivation. In ACCESS, value chain partnerships demonstrated how collaboration led to practical improvements for all stakeholders, reinforcing commitment by showing clear returns on participation. Successful collaborations effectively link individual interests with broader collective goals, ensuring that all participants see value in the process and results.

Clear roles and responsibilities, regular progress updates, and shared decision-making processes create procedural legitimacy that sustains engagement. Fair distribution of benefits and tangible improvements for all stakeholders prove crucial for maintaining engagement.

A Cyclical Relationship

This motivational dynamic is particularly powerful when it connects to stakeholders' own interests while also serving the broader collective good. When participants can see how their individual objectives align with the shared vision and experience concrete benefits from working together, their motivation becomes more deeply rooted.

What emerges is a cyclical relationship: initial collaboration creates the conditions for trust to develop, which enables deeper collaboration. While conventional wisdom might suggest that trust must precede collaboration, a more dynamic interplay unfolds. As collaboration develops, instrumental considerations typically gain importance. The partnership must demonstrate tangible progress toward collective goals to maintain momentum. Without visible results, even the most procedurally sound collaboration risks disintegration as partners question its value.

What enables collaboration in innovation?

Capabilities: Building the Foundations for Collaboration

Motivation alone, however compelling, rarely suffices without the capabilities to collaborate effectively. Across the case studies, we observe deliberate investments in building individual and collective capabilities that enable meaningful participation.

ACCESS (Burkina Faso) integrated training into project activities, fostering collaboration skills through hands-on experience.

WEFA (Tanzania) built social capabilities for gender transformation, using male champions and model couples to promote equitable decision-making.

LIPS-ZIM (Zimbabwe) strengthened government extension services by providing transport, field visit allowances, and training rather than creating parallel structures.

IDEAS (Colombia) addressed power imbalances with workshops on cartography, law, and communication, enabling community participation in decision-making.

Effective collaboration also depends on leadership and facilitation. Skilled facilitators bridge institutional cultures, manage power dynamics, and maintain momentum. Clear governance structures, such as ESSA's steering committee, ensure balanced representation.

The ACCESS project in Burkina Faso demonstrates a sophisticated approach to capability development, recognising that "effective collaboration requires specific skills and mindsets that often need to be developed over time."

At its core, capability building involves knowledge exchange, mutual learning, and problem-solving. Through ongoing interaction, stakeholders develop shared understanding, analytical skills, and access to previously unavailable resources, forming a solid foundation for sustained collaboration.

Opportunities: Creating Spaces and Structures for Collaboration

Beyond motivation and capabilities, collaboration requires structured opportunities—spaces, institutional support, and resources for joint work.

ESSA fosters scientific exchange through bi-weekly seminars and annual meetings, sustaining long-term collaboration. Sustenta & Inova (Brazil) creates physical hubs where traditional knowledge meets scientific expertise, supporting ongoing engagement.

ACCESS uses commune-level innovation platforms to build trust and co-create solutions while its inter-ministerial unit fosters government-wide coordination.
IRRINN innovation platforms bring together farmers, banks, NGOs, and government actors to develop irrigation solutions, sustaining multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Collaboration platforms create trust and institutional arrangements—both formal (agreements, partnerships) and informal (ways of working together). These spaces allow resource pooling, strengthening joint initiatives that no single actor could achieve alone.

Interplay of Capabilities, Opportunities, and Motivation

The COM-B framework illustrates how these elements reinforce each other:

- Capabilities enable stakeholders to recognize and act on opportunities.
- Opportunities allow capabilities to be built and applied.
- Positive experiences enhance motivation, driving investment in collaboration.

Gaps in any element can undermine collaboration. In ACCESS, early partners lacked clarity on roles, delaying progress. In IRRINN, motivation issues in financial reporting stalled funding. IDEAS (Colombia) succeeded by integrating all three elements—building community capabilities, creating structured opportunities, and ensuring visible benefits to sustain motivation.

Collaboration thrives when power imbalances are addressed, context-specific strategies are used, and sustainability is built into capability, opportunity, and motivation development.

How do partners know that collaborative platforms are working?

The case studies reveal a mix of formal and informal evaluation approaches that partners use to assess their collaborative initiatives. The most meaningful signs of success often manifest through subtle shifts in behavior and relationships rather than formal metrics alone.

Resilience under Pressure

Several projects evaluate their platforms by how they perform under stress or challenge. The Sustenta & Inova project in Brazil assesses how well collaboration continues despite shifting political winds. When participants feel ownership of the process, they maintain commitment regardless of contextual changes. IRRINN discovered which collaborative relationships were robust enough to weather a funding crisis when one partner's reporting delays halted funding for all participants.

The Sustainability Test: Continuation Beyond Project Support

A demanding evaluation criterion across multiple cases is whether collaborative mechanisms continue without direct project support. The ACCESS project hopes that "innovation platforms will survive after the project and people will continue to work even if the project isn't there." ESSA considers partners' desire to continue working together beyond the current project period as a key success indicator. LIPS-ZIM recognizes success through "autonomous momentum"—the spontaneous adoption of project approaches by organizations outside the immediate project sphere.

Practical Outcomes as Evidence

Partners also evaluate collaboration through tangible outcomes. In CLIMA LOCA partners monitored technological achievements, such as the implementation of X-Ray Fluorescence machines for testing cadmium levels in cocoa beans. In Sustenta & Inova market integration was seen as a key criterion. It measured facilitated contracts worth R $6.3 million (around €1,026M) through public food acquisition programs. ACCESS on the other hand, looks to institutional change, such as establishing an inter-ministerial coordination unit, as evidence of collaborative effectiveness.

Trust-building

Trust emerges as both a prerequisite for and an indicator of effective collaboration. This is well illustrated in the IDEAS project, where the willingness of previously antagonistic parties to engage in joint planning or defend each other's interests suggested growing trust.

CLIMA LOCA evaluates trust through the quality of information sharing and joint ownership of sensitive outputs with government agencies.

Power Dynamics as Evaluative Lenses

For platforms addressing power imbalances, evaluation often centers on observable shifts in decision-making dynamics. In the WEFA project success was evaluated through changes in women's decision-making power and participation in agricultural activities. The IDEAS project assessed impact through observable changes in community agency in territorial planning and resource management. LIPS-ZIM evaluates power shifts through interventions like weighing scales at livestock markets, which transform farmers from passive price-takers to informed negotiators.

Independent Validation as Evaluation Approach

Several projects incorporate independent monitoring mechanisms, like in the LIPS-ZIM project where a government monitoring team comprising senior officials conducted bi-annual monitoring visits. IRRINN values external validation when partners independently acknowledge the value of the collaborative approach and adopt similar methods.

These findings show that DeSIRA partners use a wide range of criteria when evaluating their platforms. While they consider tangible outcomes, most cases focus even more strongly on the process of collaboration, its resilience and sustainability as major success criteria. Trust building and addressing power dynamics are important processes that also factor into their evaluations.

Lessons Learned

Drawing from the DeSIRA case studies, several key lessons emerged regarding the legitimacy and effectiveness of multistakeholder collaboration in agricultural innovation.

Lessons for Leading Organizations: Strategic Imperatives for Effective Collaboration

Ensuring legitimacy: process and outcomes

Effective collaboration requires both process and outcome legitimacy. Process legitimacy concerns whether methods are transparent, inclusive, and fair. Outcome legitimacy addresses whether collaboration delivers tangible results that meet stakeholders' expectations.
Legitimacy emerges through a dynamic process: inclusive stakeholder mobilization, creation of shared vision, demonstration of benefits, and development of trust.
True legitimacy demands attention to both dimensions simultaneously - a collaboration with effective processes but meagre results will ultimately lose support, just as one delivering outcomes through exclusionary processes will face credibility questions.
Importantly, legitimacy must be established in the eyes of all key stakeholders, not merely the most powerful. This requires attention to how different participants experience both processes and outcomes.

Creating Capabilities, Opportunities, and Motivation

Successful collaboration both requires and develops capabilities, opportunities, and motivation (COM) among participants:

- Capabilities include technical skills relevant to the subject matter and relational skills for effective stakeholder engagement. Successful platforms invest in building these capabilities, recognizing that effective collaboration must be developed through deliberate practice and support.

- Opportunities encompass structural elements (meetings, communication channels, decision-making processes) and resource allocations that enable meaningful participation. As stakeholders establish clear ways of working, the transaction costs of collaboration decrease, creating more opportunities for impactful joint action.

- Motivation stems from participants' perceptions of value—whether tangible benefits or alignment with core values. Strategic collaborations attend carefully to stakeholder motivations, recognizing that sustained engagement depends on participants continuing to see value in the process.

Addressing evolving needs across phases of collaboration

Collaboration evolves through distinct phases, each with specific challenges:

- Initiation phase: Legitimacy concerns revolve around prospective benefits of participation. Clarity about objectives and expected outcomes helps potential participants make informed decisions.

- Planning phase: Process legitimacy takes centre stage as participants scrutinize how the collaboration functions. Inclusive processes and clear communication become essential for maintaining engagement.

- Collaboration maturation phase: Outcome legitimacy becomes increasingly important as participants evaluate whether the collaboration is generating anticipated benefits that justify continued investment.

Across all phases, context sensitivity remains vital, requiring adaptive frameworks tailored to specific contextual requirements.

Balancing structure and flexibility

Successful collaboration requires a delicate balance between structure and flexibility. Effective platforms establish clear frameworks while maintaining sufficient adaptability to respond to emerging insights and changing circumstances.

This balance extends to governance arrangements, which must provide clear accountability while accommodating diverse stakeholder needs, and to knowledge management, which must capture learning systematically while remaining open to new insights.

Cultivating leadership for collaboration

Collaborative leadership emphasizes facilitation rather than direction, influence rather than control, and shared ownership rather than centralized authority. Collaborative leaders must work across organizational boundaries, navigate diverse interests, and build trust among stakeholders.

Importantly, collaborative leadership is not confined to those with formal authority but can emerge from any stakeholder who effectively advances the collaborative agenda. Strategic approaches identify and nurture leadership potential across the stakeholder landscape, recognizing that diverse leadership voices strengthen the collaborative fabric.

Practical Lessons

By examining diverse contexts, we identify key operational insights that enable effective collaborative platforms.

Building Trust and Legitimacy

Collaboration in agricultural systems is widely accepted, but structuring and governing it presents challenges. Addressing resistance head-on strengthens trust and commitment. This requires recognizing diverse motives, capabilities, and power imbalances. Neutral facilitation—often by research organizations—supports trust, while celebrating achievements maintains engagement.

Developing Collaboration and Facilitation Skills

Effective collaboration requires specific skills in listening, negotiation, and communication. Facilitation is critical for productive engagement, with structured training, mentorship, and partnerships enhancing effectiveness. Capability-building should be tailored to different stakeholders, ensuring marginalized groups receive adequate support.

Institutional Integration for Action

Collaboration must move beyond discussion to implementation, requiring institutional support. Liaison roles, secondments, and shared information systems can embed collaboration into structures. Regular reviews help identify barriers and advocate for institutional reforms.

Strategic Flexibility Amid Changing Contexts

Collaborations must adapt to shifting political, economic, and social landscapes. Horizon scanning, scenario planning, and structured learning enable responsiveness. Governance should balance stability with adaptability, using core teams for continuity and ad hoc groups for emerging issues.

Ensuring Long-term Sustainability

Sustaining collaboration requires maintaining capabilities, motivation, and opportunities beyond initial funding. Knowledge management, locally led training, and financial sustainability strategies (e.g., service models or institutional commitments) are crucial. Stakeholder engagement must be continually reinforced through tracking benefits and clear value communication.

Effective Communication and Knowledge Sharing

Collaboration thrives on accessible, multi-channel communication. Knowledge products should suit different audiences, while structured exchange events (e.g., learning journeys, communities of practice) promote shared learning. Tailored approaches ensure inclusivity across technological and linguistic differences.

Delivering Tangible Benefits

Sustained collaboration depends on delivering real benefits. Tracking systems ensure fair distribution, while staged implementation secures early wins. Stakeholder feedback mechanisms adjust approaches, and clear benefit communication fosters continued engagement.

Holistic Evaluation for Impact

Evaluations should measure both tangible results (adoption of innovations, institutional changes) and collaborative processes (trust-building, power dynamics). The COM-B framework helps assessing capabilities, opportunities, and motivations. Crucially, the most meaningful evaluations often come from stakeholders themselves, as their continued engagement signals real success.

Suggestions to incorporate lessons learned into future action

Recommendations for those "doing"

Several detailed suggestions emerge for project staff who are key "do-ers" implementing multistakeholder collaboration initiatives. Most importantly, staff should recognise that successful collaboration requires balancing structure with flexibility, technical expertise with relationship building, and immediate results with long-term sustainability. This means developing work plans that allow time for relationship building while maintaining focus on deliverables and creating systems that can adapt to changing circumstances while preserving core project objectives.

Recommendations for those "enabling"

Similarly, donors, who are key "enablers" of the projects, should recognise that effective collaboration requires patient investment in both systems and relationships. This means moving beyond traditional project cycles to support longer-term institutional transformation, while maintaining flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities and challenges.

Recommendations for those "thinking"

For project designers, who form the key "thinkers", should create flexible frameworks that allow projects to adapt while maintaining strategic focus. This means building in regular review points, establishing clear but adaptable governance structures, and creating systems that can evolve as stakeholder capabilities and relationships develop. Finally, designers should incorporate learning mechanisms that enable projects to capture and share insights about effective collaboration. This means creating systems for documenting both successes and challenges and enabling cross-project learning about what works in different contexts.

Conclusion: The Collaborative Imperative

Across diverse contexts, people and organizations engage in collaborative platforms because some challenges cannot be solved alone. These platforms serve as value chain connectors, policy influencers, power brokers, and knowledge integrators, offering structured ways to combine perspectives, resources, and capabilities.

The COM-B framework highlights the need to develop capabilities, create opportunities, and sustain motivation for effective collaboration. Strong capabilities help stakeholders maximize opportunities, while clear opportunities encourage skill development. Both are reinforced by motivation—shaped by transparent processes and visible benefits.

Evaluating collaboration requires a multi-faceted approach that considers relationships, processes, outcomes, and sustainability. No single metric captures its complexity; effective evaluation blends formal and informal methods. Ultimately, the best measure of success is when stakeholders no longer need external support to collaborate effectively.

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