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# **Putting heads together**

Agricultural innovation platforms in practice

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# V The Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform<sup>28</sup>

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A platform could be a temporary measure, primarily serving a time- and place-specific function for addressing specifically defined problems.



#### 1 Introduction

The Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform (OSSUP) is a commodity-based multi-stake-holder platform that has a priority of innovation and technological upgrading. The Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform as a national platform adopted a strong focus on policy and sector-wide co-ordination. It is linked to two regional platforms that were supported and facilitated by the Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association (UOSPA). The platform has an active membership of large- and medium-scale processors, farmers' organisations, financial institutes, government agencies, researchers, development and nongovernmental organisations, knowledge institutes and agricultural input providers. Members participate on a voluntary basis, and their contribution depends on the issues addressed during meetings or in a specific period.

Initiated in 2005, the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform envisioned a competitive and sustainable vegetable oil sub-sector in Uganda. Different oilseed crops have been introduced at different times into Uganda since 1910: sesame, groundnuts and soybean in the 1910s, cotton in the 1930s, and sunflower around the 1950s. Sunflower is grown purely for its oil content, cotton for lint and oil, soybean and groundnuts mainly as food crops, sesame for export and domestic consumption as a paste. Oilseed production led to the development of seed-processing capacity and oil extraction starting in the 1950s. The economic turmoil and civil unrest in the 1970s-80s brought the sector completely to its knees. Concerted efforts since the late 1990s attempted to revitalise the sub-sector again. These public and private endeavours, in combination with changes in the economic and political conditions, encouraged large numbers of farmers to take up sunflower production. Gradually, processors explored ways to source oilseed locally, rather than importing Asian

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> This case study is a result of the action-research programme Value Chains for Pro-poor Development (http://www.dgis.wur.nl/UK/VC4PD/, implemented by Wageningen UR under the Partnership Programme Globalisation and Sustainable Rural Development of the Netherlands' Directorate-General for International Co-operation and Wageningen University and Research Centre, in collaboration with Agriterra and AgriProfocus. Further research and analysis was supported by the Partnerships Resource Centre (http://www.partnershipsresourcecentre.org/). Partners in Uganda were the OSSUP (Uganda Oilseed Sub-sector Platform), Makerere University, the Netherlands Development Organisation SNV, and UOSPA (Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association). Research for this paper was assisted by Ray Agong, (UOSPA), Moses Oremo Opio, District Agricultural Office Lira / Van Hall Larenstein University, Robert Nayebare and Ronald Lulijwa, master students Makerere University.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Netherlands Development Organisation SNV (until January 2011).

palm oil. However, in 2005, key players in the sub-sector still observed that despite a clear domestic market for edible oil and also for feed cake (a by-product of oilseed processing), the absence of an effective link to agricultural producers constrained the expansion and viability of the sub-sector (Luseesa, 2007).

In 2005 and 2006, the Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association together with a couple of supporting organisations concluded that there was a need to try out another formula for co-ordinated action addressing complex problems, such as market co-ordination, technological upgrading, and the provision of financial services. Setting up the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform was motivated by the observation that, in weak markets, small and medium enterprises and producer organisations thrive on skewed information and necessarily concentrate most of their efforts towards short-term gains and immediate problems. Accordingly, their perspective on collective interests tends to be narrow. This kind of a situation easily breeds suspicion and mistrust among the stakeholders, which hampers co-ordinated actions and contributes to sector stagnation. The idea behind the multi-stakeholder processes under the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform umbrella was therefore to seek orchestration in solving industry challenges and to engage farmers, intermediaries and food industries in planning and managing production and trade at a level beyond the individual farm (Devaux et al., 2007).

In the initial phase of the platform, discussions among platform members indicated a mismatch between demand and supply. Outside contractual arrangements with larger processing firms, some of which have operated cotton ginneries, most farmers sold their produce immediately after harvesting to brokers at the farm gate, agents of traders in the village, or small-scale millers in the growing area. Consequently, buyers were also uncertain about obtaining enough raw materials for operating at their full installed capacity. In response to these observed problems, the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform, as a national platform with a policy focus, began to work on actions that could improve production levels, mainly by making improved planting material available, encouraging coordination in supply and demand, and stimulating out-scaling of tools and practices found at different places in the sector.

#### 2 Modus operandi

Initiated in 2005, the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform was a loose network of individual member organisations brought together based on the shared interest of making a competitive vegetable oil sub-sector. The platform was importantly initiated by the Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association, which used to play a co-ordinating role within the sector. However, the association was also engaged in the business of multiplication and distribution of open-pollinated sunflower varieties (of which the foundation seed is supplied by the National Agricultural Research Organisation - NARO). Producer organisations linked to the oilseed producers' and processors' association engaged in various bulking and collective marketing initiatives. It represented farmers and farmers' groups as well as small, medium and to some extent larger processors, and organised pre-

season co-ordination workshops to fine-tune planting seed and demand. These activities made it difficult for other actors to approve its role as co-ordinator.

In collaboration with the Dutch Agri-ProFocus network, a new experimental platform was initiated to "weave the web". When the platform was initiated, the oilseed producers' and processors' association labelled it as an institutional experiment. The question was how would the platform, as a new form of collective action in a sub-sector, complement existing approaches to collective action, such as collective marketing via farmers' organisations and co-operatives for achieving economies of scale, enhancing bargaining power, or managing common pool resources (Devaux et al., 2009, Shepherd, 2007).

#### **Facilitation**

Facilitation roles were taken up by a variety of organisations involved in the network. The Netherlands Development Organisation SNV hosted platform meetings and functioned as a secretariat. From 2006 to 2010, the platform was linked to a collaborative research project of Makerere University in Uganda and Wageningen University and Research Centre in the Netherlands. The leading research team co-operated with SNV in facilitating the learning process of the platform and they jointly tried to find a language that gave expression to the functional role of the platform. In 2010, the co-ordination and secretariat function (i.e., organising meetings, sharing information, and pro-actively linking actors) was embedded in the renewed national public support programme for the oilseed and edible oil sector: the Vegetable Oil Development Programme. The sub-sector platform's visibility and performance in previous years had convinced the national government and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) that a platform function was essential for the sector, and decided to include the platform in this support programme. The platform's capacity to present a strategic agenda with selected priorities as well as a number of joint activities of its members that supported this agenda had indicated that a platform plays a role complementary to, for example, the investments in processing capacity or the setting up of bulking arrangements by associated farmers (Ton et al., 2010).

Facilitation was an important ingredient of the platform. When it started, a polarised situation existed because the oilseed producers' and processors' association was linked to open-pollinated varieties as well as the leading processing firm and main distributor of cooking oil in Uganda. In 2006-7, the Mukwano company implemented a contract farming scheme meant to realise a shift from imported palm oil to locally sourced oilseed as the main ingredient for their branded edible oil. Mukwano imported hybrid sunflower seeds for distribution to around 30,000 contracted smallholder farmers, who were also expected to sell their seed to the company. The contract farming scheme and the use of hybrid seed figured prominently in policy debates in the oil seed sub-sector and therefore affected the processes in the platform.

After a period of storming and forming (Ton and Vellema, 2010), the platform succeeded to use its quarterly meetings to develop a shared policy agenda outlook. The facilitator tried to shift attention from a polarising discussion on single solutions - to diagnosis, priority and agenda setting; and targeted advocacy towards public policy, support programmes and services. The decision to organise a strategic policy dialogue in 2009 stimulated the

platform to set priorities and compose messages for different audiences in government and public support programmes. Parallel to this, the continuous dialogue in the platform also enabled joint or bilateral actions among members; these activities took place outside actual platform meetings but were still interpreted by government agencies and financial organisations as an indicator of increased levels of co-ordination in the sector. Likewise, the Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association played a prominent role in consulting stakeholders at regional levels, which mainly facilitated farmers to voice their interests and to respond to the propositions framed by the national platform.

Concrete activities, such as the writing of a petition asking for the release of improved planting material by a governmental authority stimulated joint action by the platform and helped to detect the boundaries of the sphere of influence of a policy-oriented platform. This created space for other stakeholders to act, as a company or organisation, or in bilateral agreements. As part of the process, research gave inputs showing the diversity of practices and arrangements present in the sector, for example in the field of bulking. In a round of reflection interviews, members indicated that over the years, the platform generated a space for growing appreciation of different roles played within the sector and an awareness for the mutual dependency in achieving competitiveness. The language used to express priorities during the strategic policy dialogue was one of the indications. Outside the platform, new linkages between associated farmers and buyers suggested a new level of co-ordination, and the willingness of banks and local government officials to engage with problem solving in the sector was one of the results of this.

### 3 Activities and objectives

When organising and setting priorities for the strategic policy dialogue in 2009, the platform took an interest in exploring pathways to enhance innovation, up-scale proven and locally invented technologies, and promote a demand-driven research & development programme that links farmers and processors with research and stimulates local innovativeness. As its general task, the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform adopted a strategic focus on enabling policy and regulation. This entailed advocacy for coherent sector-specific policy and legislation, stimulating linkages to decentralised government resources and a functional division of labour between stakeholders in public-private partnerships (Bitzer et al., 2011). In this process, the platform discussed technical choices, in particular the choice of seed and processing equipment, and the linkages of producers with input dealers, research, and extension services (in particular the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS)). Firstly, the platform aimed to create the conditions that would ensure farmers' access to improved planting material by:

- Making vegetable oils a priority in public research & development programmes, releasing new, locally bred varieties, and enabling maintenance breeding;
- Enforcing available regulation and certification in seed multiplication and supply to ensure germination; and
- Strengthening linkages to stockist networks and seed multipliers to decentralise and enhance supply capacity.

Secondly, the platform adopted a policy lens in looking at technological upgrading and innovative capacity. Here, it tried to initiate and strengthen institutional arrangements for up-scaling and catalysing tangible technological improvements in the sub-sector by:

- Complementing policy incentives directed at large-scale investments with incentives tailored to (clustered) small-scale enterprises and farmers;
- Using bulking centres and embedded service provision as the entry point for outscaling technical know-how and providing extension services;
- Up-scaling local innovative capacity in processing and farming; and
- Constructing a research & development market place for stakeholders in the sub-sector.

#### 4 Achievements to date

This section examines the outcomes of the two fields within which the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform was active (i.e., the provision of planting material and the building of networks around commodity-focused innovation), that can be attributed to the functioning of the platform.

#### Improved planting material, selection and conflict resolution

The sub-sector platform was able to overcome major conflicts among its members. At the beginning, the discussion was structured by labelling two opposite value chains by the planting seeds used: a (Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association-supported) Sunfola chain and a (Mukwano-promoted) hybrid chain (Bindraban et al., 2006). The issue of access to seeds (open-pollinated or hybrid) figured frequently in discussions in and outside platform meetings, and also induced controversies in the sub-sector. Use of hybrid seed was also discussed at length at a regional platform meeting in Lira at the time of price hikes. Lira is the centre of the area where much of the milling and production is concentrated. Farmers were strongly represented during the regional platform meeting, and expressed their concerns in relation to their immediate constraints, such as finding trustworthy market outlets and access to planting seed.<sup>32</sup> Various allegations came to the fore, targeting the position and strategy of the lead firm Mukwano that had been successful in contracting farmers as suppliers to its processing plant. In such a context, the choice between open-pollinated varieties (distributed by a member-based organisation) and a hybrid variety (distributed by a lead processing firm), easily led to polarisation and stalemates for co-operation. During this episode, chain interventions, such as contract farming and the attached perception of a possible monopoly, became included in the controversy, making the lead firm vulnerable to charges of exploitation of poor farmers (Johnston, 2007).

The labelling of value chains provoked a level of duality in the sub-sector, which was gradually replaced by an acceptance of diversity and a wish to aim for strategic policy that incorporates this diversity. For example, breeders from the national agricultural research institute proposed to work on both hybrid and open-pollinated varieties, because farmers may

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Source: minutes of the Regional Platform Meeting – Northern Region (Lira, December 4, 2007).

choose differently depending on the specific conditions under which they operate. This indicates that the platform created space to encourage co-existing pathways and to work on public interests and joint actions, rather than provoking a choice between distinct technical recipes.

At national-level discussions in the platforms and a parallel petition discussed in parliament, access to hybrid seed was relabelled as a public good. Interactions in the platform led to the involvement of a member-based association specialised in input distribution, UNADA.<sup>33</sup> This association was willing to work with Mukwano to facilitate a wider distribution of hybrid seeds and entered with Mukwano into a tripartite agreement with a donor organisation (ASPS – Danida) arranging a guarantee fund for the venture. Mukwano agreed to use its position as lead firm to arrange the import of hybrid seed for distribution by UNADA stockists. The quantity of imported hybrid seed was not enough to saturate the national market.

The platform's strategy moved from a focus of sometimes polarising processes of selection of specific technologies, to a focus on enabling conditions for selection and development of new tools, practices, and linkages.

#### Innovation, out-scaling and network building

During the strategic policy dialogue organised by the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform in 2009, innovative capacity appeared to be a difficult issue to address. Consultants asked to identify relevant, existing policy frameworks initially started, to explore and prescribe technical recipes. Only after intense discussion with platform members did it become clear that linking to a diverse policy landscape was closer to how the platform perceived its function. During the policy dialogue itself, a discussion evolved around linking producers in the oilseed sub-sector to the major extension programme in Uganda: NAADS. Discussions in the platform recognised that the need to find balance between specialisation in or concentration on a cash crop (private interest), and food security (public interest). NAADS was recommended to work with clustered farmers and to embed intervention strategies in the practice of bulking in a specific value chain, i.e. oilseed/edible oil. This contrasted with the more ad hoc and changing selection of intervention areas practised in NAADS. During the dialogue, the need to intensify linkages between technology users and a research & development programme was listed as a priority. A Research & Development Marketplace was suggested to show farmers and processors what technologies, including varieties, are available so that they are better able to select what they want and to set the research agenda.

An inventory (in 2008) of the technologies offered and services provided in five sunflower-producing districts in Uganda found the following: The provision of seed, either open-pollinated or hybrid varieties, was most important in service provision. Public and private stakeholders with access to seed were predominant sources of technology in the oilseed sub-sector. Next to seed, materials for on-farm drying were provided, either as grants or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> UNADA stands for Uganda National Agro-inputs Dealers Association, which brings together all input stockists across the country to co-operate on issues broader than individuals can address e.g. quality compliance and regulation, standards, etc.



A woman sells locally processed oil at the market Place: Lira, Uganda. Photo: S. Vellema

at subsidised prices. Ram presses for village processing and motorised mills were provided by public support programmes. In the case of ram presses, support agencies encouraged fabrication or repair modification by local artisans. Farmers' groups, for example involved in produce bulking or seed multiplication, or associated farmers, for example grouped around contact farmers or site co-ordinators, were important entry points for service delivery.

In response to the fragmented innovation network in the Ugandan oilseed sub-sector, the platform organised a Research & Development Marketplace at the Department of Food Science and Technology, Makerere University in 2010. This marketplace brought forward examples of technical change, such as processing of 21 varieties of cosmetics from shea butter with an improved shelf life. A rural works vehicle was adapted to poor road

infrastructure and poor access to energy, and worked as a satellite, collecting oilseeds from farmers and taking them to a central collection point near a major road. It also worked as a "downstream vehicle", taking supplies from the main roads into deeper rural areas. A sesame planter, which eliminated the need for farmers to use the wasteful broadcast system, and instead plant more efficiently in rows, had a simple design that reduced the time needed to plant an acre of land. And, finally, a new practice for drying sunflowers was uncovered, originating from evolving trial-and-error experiments in villages and collaboration with processors.

The Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform took the initiative to visualise concrete examples of new tools and practices in the sub-sector, which was part of an endeavour to use this exposure for building new linkages, enabling out-scaling of tools and practices. Bulking nodes were proposed as entry points for interventions.

## 5 Challenges

The platform gradually developed its specific function in the context of a variety of stakeholders, organisations and their behaviours and strategies in the Ugandan oilseed sub-sector. The value of eir contribution, described here in terms of conflict resolution, common language and network building, was recognised by its members and also by external agencies, in particular the government and donor agencies. One of the major challenges for the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform will be to perform this policy-oriented and enabling function, aiming for a higher level of co-ordinated action, without getting too deeply involved in the actual implementation of interventions. The latter can be done by individual stakeholders or by joint actions. On several occasions the platform has discussed its roadmap, and eventually, the importance of facilitating its members to jointly contribute to performing the platform's function become evident. The platform has since managed to institutionalise its function in a renewed public support programme.

#### 6 Lessons learned

There is no magic recipe for platform facilitation. The case of the Ugandan Oilseed Subsector Platform shows that collective action in the economic realm does not just happen; it needs facilitation tailored to the real dynamics of conflicting interests, commercial time spans, and regional diversity. The analysis points to the dynamics inherent to group formation. A platform will have to go through a trajectory of discussions and turbulence before it discovers its proper function. Starting small task groups on specific issues at an early stage of development generated an atmosphere that helped to overcome contrasting views and interests. Although literature may suggest otherwise, namely that diversity within a group impairs joint action and strategising, the diversity within this platform turned out to be a valuable asset. To be able to represent the diverse perspectives in a fair way depended on good (external) facilitation as well as on finding complementarities and synergies with on-going value chain interventions, such as contract farming or group-based bulking.

The ways in which the platform evolved allowed the stakeholders to discover and explore the platform's function in a landscape of commercial activity, farmers' organisations, and diverse support strategies. Taking more of a policy focus led to an improved functioning and operational value chain. In this case, the facilitation team agreed that it was more important to organise a process of trial-and-error experimentation for proper functioning, rather than to start from an institutional fix, exemplified in an official status and by-laws. The lesson is that a platform needs time to experiment with activities to explore its complementarity to other actions and focus on its "as-they-are-function" in a specific context.

Moreover, a platform could be a temporary measure, primarily serving a time- and place-specific function for addressing defined problems, for example access to planting seed. It may therefore not be necessary to strive towards long-lasting, more permanent organisational structures. One of the pitfalls for facilitators is to introduce rules to speed up the process or, in response to donor requirements, to establish by-laws and logical frameworks, rather than to facilitate the embedded development of rules and ownership (Devaux et al., 2009). The challenge is to find a match between quick wins, showing the relevance of a platform and joint action by, for example, making improved seed varieties accessible, and setting up durable new institutions. For instance building up a research & development process involving the National Agricultural Research Organisation, universities, farmers' organisations and food-processing firms is a delicate task. Working for innovation in a collaborative way will be more widely embraced if its social, cultural, or psychological processes support the changes in a routine manner such that they do not require continued intervention to be sustained (Lawrence et al., 1999).

The interaction between the different levels (regional and national) was crucial for the success of the platform. The connectivity of the Ugandan Oilseed Sub-sector Platform as a national platform, and the regional platforms, facilitated by the Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association, was an important ingredient in the entire set-up. Comparative examples suggest that building on already existing groups or networks benefits collective action in a sub-sector, which, in the case of oilseed, implies farmers' organisations, but also smaller groupings, such as women coming together to save, or church-based groups venturing into processing. This set-up can be instrumental for taking advantage of the political and administrative decentralisation in Uganda by involving local authorities and support agencies (Devaux et al., 2007). Regional platforms are also relevant for territory-based strategies of companies and networks; e.g. Mukwano's contract farming schemes, the networks of agents of traders and processors in rural communities, and the Uganda Oilseed Producers and Processors Association in providing planting materials and extension services.

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