

Sharing and shaping a better future

Catalysing agricultural innovation through strengthening functional capacities, or soft skills



"CDAIS has been able to bring us all together. It is a small project, but filled with passion. CDAIS has been able to weave together the many different mandates of its partners and this is very much appreciated. There were many challenges but CDAIS tackled them intensively."

Caroline Glynn, President, Agrinatura-EEIG, and SLU, Sweden

After four years of intensive work, some 128 people from more than 40 countries gathered in Belgium for almost a week of final reflection on what had been achieved and learned from a major EU-funded project, and share recommendations with representatives from development partners from around the world. The core of this was the CDAIS International Forum held on 13-14 May 2019, at Agri-Bio Tech in the University of Liege, Gembloux.

"It was a challenge to cover in two days what has been achieved in 4-5 years. This Forum has been all about showing how to work together – what we have done, and what changes have been made, showcasing the work from the pilot countries - leading to concrete recommendations at various levels."

Myra Wopereis-Pura, CDAIS Global Coordinator

The context was set by Divine Nganje Njie, Deputy Strategic Programme Leader, Food Systems Programme, FAO, Rome. "Innovation is needed to transform our agriculture and food systems and make them sustainable, inclusive and resilient. The Tropical Agriculture Platform brought coherence

with the ‘common framework’ that focuses on developing functional capacities, and which will bring agricultural innovation into action. Because having knowledge and not having it applied brings nothing, and this Forum brings us first hand experiences of such application. FAO thanks Agrinatura for their work in this strategic partnership,” which was fully supported by the EU, who supported CDAIS from the outset.

“This project has produced significant results and has contributed to complementing the work of many organisations. The initiative brought together actors from Europe and developing countries, and started a process that is having catalytic effects in how to bring partnerships alive and efficient.”

Christophe Larose, Head of Sustainable Agriculture, Rural Development, Food Security and Nutrition, EuropeAid, European Commission, Brussels

Insights and perspectives were shared by 50 people from the eight CDAIS country teams from Angola, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Guatemala, Honduras, Laos and Rwanda, and those from the global partnership led by Agrinatura and FAO. These real experiences from those intimately involved, presented a clear picture of the increased transformations based on this integrated approach to strengthening functional capacities to innovate in agriculture. Changes have occurred, mindsets and attitudes have shifted. That was clear.

“While in Gembloux, we explored the different parts of the world where functional capacities were strengthened especially in Africa, Asia and Central America.”

Philippe Petithuguenin, Agrinatura representative in the CDAIS project oversight committee, and CIRAD, France

And a series of six manuals and guidelines, and two books of personal testimonies were launched to help future implementation of similar initiatives, to be supported by an ongoing systematic and continuous analysis of data and information.

The publications that the project has produced provide a compendium of experiences that will inform us and many others in how we can better apply this in our programmes.”

Divine Nganje Njie, Deputy Strategic Programme Leader, Food Systems Programme, FAO, Rome

This is only part of the ‘story’. CDAIS was a pilot project, and was primarily intended to test a set of approaches for capacity development to improve innovation in agriculture. Or in other words, to improve the ability and capability of ‘actors’ involved in such systems to make new things happen in complex and unpredictable situations. Sharing is one thing, but how to better *shape* what is to come? So what was learnt during the process was discussed in depth, with a strong set of recommendations made to further guide donors and practitioners alike?

“The CDAIS project has played an important role pertinent to the work of the Tropical Agriculture Platform. We have seen reflections of the operationalisation of the approach in the local context, from Agrinatura, FAO and country partners. And this has shown that we can’t talk about innovation if we don’t talk about partnerships in design and implementation, and the emphasis on developing individual and functional capacities. We have seen here that a complex project can achieve real impacts in only 3 or 4 years, giving real added value, and that the actors really feel involved at all levels. And we now look at how this approach can be integrated into other programmes.”

Christophe Larose, Head of Sustainable Agriculture, Rural Development, Food Security and Nutrition, EuropeAid, European Commission, Brussels



What is CDAIS?

In 2015, organisations from eight countries, along with many global partners, were given the challenging task of putting into practice a new concept. Improving rural livelihoods through agricultural innovation had seemed easy. Many technologies have been introduced over the years, new seed varieties, micro-finance, and much more. But progress is still limited. Why? One thought was that farmers and those who work with them still lack the ‘functional capacities’, or what some call ‘soft skills’, needed for change to happen, like the ability to link with others, negotiate, and engage in political processes. This conclusion was confirmed at a 2011 meeting of ministers of agriculture from the G20 countries, who decided to establish the Tropical Agriculture Platform (TAP) to address this. Agrinatura, a consortium of European universities and research institutes, and the EU, responded to TAP’s call for support with the Capacity Development for Agricultural Innovations Systems (CDAIS) project, managed by Agrinatura and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). And through this, a global taskforce was mobilized to draw up a methodology, which was called the ‘common framework’ on capacity development for agricultural innovation systems, to be field tested in the eight pilot countries of the CDAIS project.

The ultimate aim of the CDAIS project was to find the best ways to improve agricultural innovation systems by strengthening the functional capacities of those involved in them, that took place through the facilitation of interactions between diverse stakeholders, identifying a common vision, problems to be overcome and how to do this, supported by training, and reflection and learning events as well as joint tracking of progress. This occurred on various partnerships and systems level of intervention, looking at the three dimensions - individual, organisation and institutions. And the CDAIS approach appeals because it opened spaces for interaction, supporting individuals and organisations to work better together to achieve their common goals.

And results from the two intensive days fulfilled these aims, with many recommendations made, and, hopefully to be taken up. There was a general agreement that the common framework and its approaches to strengthen capacities to innovate is valid although work should continue on how it is communicated, disseminated and practiced by various users. We should keep the momentum, continue to generate knowledge and ensure analysis of the outcomes to further improve the framework and its approaches. Future investments and actions should leverage on the existing knowledge and learning process built through CDAIS by Agrinatura, FAO and the eight pilot countries. In particular take note

of the key resources (people and organisations, time, tools and processes and funds) and drivers (actors, institutions and networks).

These were well summed up in the closing statement by European Economic Interest Group (EEIG) vice-president Huub Hoffler, “There is lots to discuss regarding how we now need to fine-tune these approaches. But what is clear is that what you have done matters. What CDAIS had done matters. Now, to build on this momentum, with evidence-based information to add to the stories.”

The CDAIS International Forum was a success, and began a week of broader meeting, so those who had travelled far could benefit from participating in some of the other organised events. These included meetings of the Tropical Agriculture Platform Expert Group and the Agrinatura Task Team, as well as the Agrinatura General Assembly including public meetings organised by the University of Liege, and the annual meeting of the European Economic Interest Group (EEIG).

All in all, from farmer-level to continental and international level, how to better strengthen capacities to innovate in agriculture were presented, discussed, and firm recommendations made, and at all levels. This was likely the first time that this issue has been dealt with at this level and in this way with such a mix of individuals and partners with intense discussions and interactions. The seeds were sown, and watered. Now to ensure they are tended, we need the commitment and accountability by the drivers of change at global, regional and national level.