

Agrecol autumn workshop, 16–18 September 2022, Radebeul, Germany

“Prolinnova as a network promoting local innovation in agroecology”



Introduction

Since 2019, Agrecol Association is the Northern Focal Point for the Prolinnova network. This international network, which has been active for over 20 years, is made up of:

- a) a Googlegroup of individuals interested in exchanging information about promoting local innovation in agroecology and natural resource management (NRM); and
- b) a Community of Practice comprising country-based networks in Africa, Asia and Europe; these involve farmers, scientists, development agents/advisors, academia and the local private sector who engage in decentralised agricultural research and development (ARD).

The weekend meeting in Radebeul was meant to give Agrecol members and interested guests an opportunity to get to know Prolinnova better – its objectives, structure, functioning and activities. The weekend provided space for Agrecol to have personal interaction with Prolinnova partners. Together with our three guests from Kenya – Rebecca Dero, a farmer innovator; Vincent Mariadho, Prolinnova–Kenya (PK) network coordinator; and Hussein Wario, director of CRDD (Centre for Research & Development in Drylands), a PK member organisation – we could learn about the processes of discovering, documenting and supporting local innovation processes by small-scale farmers. The weekend also gave Agrecol a chance to contribute to the further development of the Prolinnova network by reflecting on the experiences in networking and multistakeholder partnerships to influence policy and practice in ARD.

Friday evening: Prolinnova network and its approach

Ann and Fanos from Agrecol are members of the (virtual) International Support Team for the Prolinnova network. Ann, assisted by Vincent, depicted the **timeline** of the network from its conception in 1999 up to the present day, using 37 mini-posters hung around the room for everyone to see throughout the meeting. The timeline was derived from the 4-page “[Prolinnova journey](#)”. The mini-posters included also information about the approach, values and structure of the network (see Annex 2).

Prolinnova is an NGO-initiated international multistakeholder partnership promoting local innovation processes in agroecology and NRM. It focuses on recognising the **dynamics** of indigenous knowledge (IK) and enhancing local capacities to adapt to change – to develop site-appropriate ways to manage resources for food security and sustainable livelihoods. It starts with discovering how farmers create new and better ways of doing things (i.e. **local innovation/LI**). It uses LI as an entry point to **participatory innovation development (PID)**: farmer-led experimentation or investigation jointly with other actors in ARD, integrating IK and scientific knowledge. The network’s vision is: ***A world where women and men farmers play decisive roles in agricultural and NRM innovation processes for sustainable livelihoods.***

Prolinnova seeks to facilitate multistakeholder partnerships and joint learning to promote local innovation processes; nurture ecologically oriented development of small-scale family farming and community-based NRM; enhance capacities of farmers and other ARD actors in PID; facilitate decentralised funding mechanisms to promote local experimentation and innovation; engage in national and regional policy dialogue to stimulate and enhance farmer-led innovation processes and integrate PID into institutions of research, extension and learning (“institutionalisation”). PID is designed to enhance local capacity to innovate, which is the key to sustainability. The network therefore seeks to scale up farmer-led local innovation processes (not local innovationS). It encourages open innovation (see Prolinnova’s copyleft statement in the posters in Annex 2).

The timeline went from the birth of Prolinnova in 1999, when NGOs from South and North (supported by GFAR, CGIAR NGO Committee and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs) met in Rambouillet, France, to explore how to scale up participatory approaches to ARD based on local initiatives. The concept was presented at the first Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) in Dresden in 2000. Since then, several multistakeholder “Country Platforms” (CPs) have formed themselves with the aim of promoting farmer-led processes of research and innovation. In many cases, several CPs joined forces in regional or inter-continental projects, such as to pilot locally managed innovation funds. They also organised several international symposia and farmer innovation fairs in Africa and Asia, in collaboration with international research institutes. When core funding for Prolinnova from the Netherlands Government came to an end with a change in Dutch development policy in 2011, the CPs agreed on minimum commitments to promote PID even without external funding.

In 1999, the participants in the Rambouillet meeting had mandated ETC Foundation, a Dutch NGO, to coordinate and support the international network. In 2016, a process of “southernising” the network led to the formation of regional platforms of CPs and an increase in South–South mentoring. The network now has no secretariat in the North but rather simply a Northern Focal Point (Agrecol Association).

The **structure** of the Prolinnova Community of Practice was visualised in a diagram made by the Subregional Coordinators in Africa (Annex 3). The main bodies are:

- **Country Platforms (CPs)**, each governed by a **Steering Committee (SC)** with members from research, extension, education, NGOs, farmers and the private sector, hosted usually by an NGO. The SC defines CP activities, gives strategic guidance and helps mobilise resources. A core team coordinates activities.
- **Subregional/regional platforms** of CPs in West & Central Africa, Eastern & Southern Africa and Asia.

- **International Support Team (IST)** that supports the network through capacity strengthening, mentoring, policy dialogue, information management, networking, publishing and the website.
- **Northern Focal Point:** Agrecol Association for AgriCulture & Ecology.
- **Prolinnova Oversight Group (POG):** governance mechanism to ensure accountability to CPs and donors, with 4 elected members from the network and 4 elected independent members, including one from a farmer organisation.
- **Friends of Prolinnova**, who provide mentoring and advisory support, link to potential partners and donors and serve as “champions” to promote the network and its approach.

Currently, there are 19 CPs in Africa, Asia and the UK, which meet annually to share about their methods, experiences and achievements and to plan joint activities related to institutionalising the PID approach.

The most striking impressions voiced about this introduction to the Prolinnova network were: the long time it has continued to exist; the high level of activity and the great variety of agencies that are ready to fund Prolinnova partners’ initiatives.

Saturday morning: Local innovation and participatory innovation development

Examples of local innovation. On Saturday morning, the Kenyan guests offered some examples of local innovation and PID in their country. First, Vincent presented a 15-minute [film](#) showing several Kenyan innovators (including Rebecca) and a farmer innovation fair in Kenya. Then Ann interviewed Rebecca about her innovation and her interactions with other farmers and outsiders about it (see video [Sharing about local innovation](#)). This interview format animated Rebecca to talk about her experiences. She introduced herself as being an innovator. She is keen to try out new ideas and is very active in sharing her ideas within and beyond her community. She meets frequently with a group of widows, who discuss – among other things – questions of how to feed their families. Her main area of activity is kitchen gardening. Her innovation in irrigating her vegetables saves both time and water: she refined her sack garden by perforating a hose as a homemade drip irrigation “kit”, rather than hauling and pouring buckets of water into the sack. During the discussion with Rebecca, it became clear that water saving is an important topic for the group of widows and is considered in many ways, e.g. collecting and using dishwater for the garden, filtering sewage water through a layer of sand in a bucket. An example of further participatory research needed was finding or developing longer-lasting materials for the garden sack and hose.



Interview with Rebecca about her innovation (Photo: Christine Martins)

Identifying and sharing about local innovation. Vincent then gave a brief presentation about how the PK network identifies and documents local innovation and facilitates farmer-led joint research (see Annex 4). He clearly differentiated between innovation (the social process of finding solutions for local problems) and innovationS (technical, organisational or institutional solutions as such – the intermediate outputs of the ongoing local innovation process).

Vincent has been coordinating PK for five years now with a fulltime position. He is in the office of World Neighbors, an NGO that is a PK partner and hosts the network. PK is working in only two out of 47 counties in Kenya. It sensitises farmers/rural communities on their creative power to develop their own solutions to their problems. It gathers and documents these innovations and helps promote them through supporting farmer innovators, organising farmer innovation fairs and publishing. It helps selected innovators to further develop their innovations through a farmer-led research process (i.e. PID) together with other ARD actors.

Exploring women's innovation in child feeding. In the next presentation (see Annex 5), Hussein described how CRRD is exploring innovation by women in north Kenya in the nutrition of small children. CRDD is one of the PK partners. Its work – specifically now with NaviNut project under the Prolinnova umbrella, funded by the German Federal Ministry of Food and Agriculture – has been initiated according to the principles of Prolinnova: including farmers in defining the research and setting the objectives. An open community fund is one of the tools used.

Discussion: A question was raised whether giving special attention to single farmer innovators upsets the social structure within the community; neither Rebecca nor Vincent felt that this was happening. Another question was about the possible disappointment of farmers whose innovations were not selected for further investigation in PID. Vincent pointed out that the selection criteria and process are very transparent to all. Many local innovations can simply be shared more widely with other farmers, without needing to be subjected to PID. PK helps farmers share their innovations through documentation, publication, video films and farmer innovation fairs. The idea is not that the local innovations be “scaled up” but rather that they give ideas that farmers can experiment with and adapt to their own conditions, i.e. that these processes of farmer experimentation and innovation are scaled up.

Saturday afternoon: Institutionalising the PID approach

In the afternoon, the focus was on issues around institutionalising the PID approach. Vincent made a short presentation on institutionalising PID into agricultural research and advisory services in Kenya (see Annex 6), highlighting the strategy developed and implemented by the CP to make the approach known and applied by these institutions as well as by other NGOs. The starting point is training PK partners from various organisations to prepare them for spreading the ideas within their organisations. Training university students is another important entry point. A course on PID is now being offered at Masenu University in Kisumu in western Kenya. The PK coordinator usually approaches ARD institutions through individual staff members who are open to the ideas but the official partner in PK is the institution, with an individual as focal person.

Then Hussein described how participatory approaches are integrated into the work of CRDD (see Annex 7). He stressed that CRDD is a group of diverse professionals committed to working in their region of origin and to serve the people there. The procedure of finding and refining a project starts with the local people.

Finally, Fanos presented a tool for assessing the integration of PID into agricultural advisory services, based on work she did with Prolinnova partners in Cambodia and Ethiopia (see Annex 8). The questions are rather broad (“to which extent does the institution apply PID?”) and open to interpretation of those who respond; the questions are not about the application of a specific tool or method that is part of PID. This provides

room for reflection by the groups that respond to the questions. Thus, the tool is primarily an impulse for discussion by groups of people who are part of an institution.



Hussein talking about CRDD experience, with Prolinnova timeline (Photo: Christine Martins)

Discussion: Challenges and opportunities in integrating PID into conventional ARD

In two small groups, the workshop participants discussed some challenges and opportunities in integrating PID into conventional ARD. The first group felt that the PID approach offers an opportunity for organised groups at local level to join; particularly the transparent process of PID and its focus on visible results makes it easy to convince people to join. Regarding challenges in integrating PID, it was suggested that a need for a legal identity to receive funds might constrain non-formalised groups to benefit.

As an international network, Prolinnova can support the process of institutionalising PID, firstly, by sharing existing experiences in doing this. It could adapt and apply assessment tools, such as the one presented by Fanos, to stimulate reflection within ARD organisations about integrating the PID approach. Also SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) could be used as a tool for this purpose. It would be important to take into account the interests and needs of the targeted organisations and to examine how PID could contribute to their existing approaches and core business. In order to broaden the network of institutions using the approach, efforts should be made to introduce PID into strong farmer organisations.

Factors that are vital for integrating PID within an organisation were identified as:

- Involvement of the local community in the design of the integration
- Funding systems that are open for open-ended PID
- Recognising farmers' rights to access funds for farmer-led research and innovation.

The discussion in the second group started with a statement by Felix, who asked himself where his own research institution in Switzerland is positioned. PID and conventional research differ in the way research questions (objectives) are determined and in the demands in conventional research on reliability, generalisation and reproducibility (more or less!). The group came to the conclusion that both are needed, especially when developing a research question that was born in a farmer's context into a more generalisable area. Then, as well, strict and standardised quality measures are important. However, in many cases, we talk of solutions for local/regional problems and of adaptation of already given solutions (not new in other areas of the world) in specific regions. There we consider farmer experimentation and/or applied research as a very important procedure to support the Prolinnova approach.

Apart from developing farmer innovations further in PID, it would be worthwhile in the case of many innovations simply to make them more widely known in the area. Here, the question is more on the ways to spread and promote specific innovations. Vincent and Hussein already mentioned holding innovation fairs and documenting and publishing innovations (the latter being perhaps more important for agricultural advisors and other institutions). Another approach could be the farmer-to-farmer or promoter approach that is now widespread in Latin America. Nevertheless, when talking about promoting a local innovation, the group wondered about the limitations of such an activity, because here it is an attempt to extend readymade solutions and not to strengthen the ability of local people to find their own solutions. It would also be important to support farmer-led experimentation within the content of farming systems rather than focusing only on single practices.

Saturday evening: visiting a vineyard in Radebeul

In the late afternoon, we walked from the Radebeul Family Centre, where the workshop was held, to the vineyard and seasonal tavern of the Walter family. There we enjoyed a tour of the vineyard – including the tasting of various wines – and a delicious meal with still more wine in the seasonal tavern. As the temperatures dropped, we walked to Susanne’s family home for still more wine and a very “*gemütliche*” (warm and cosy) and interesting info-round, according to the Agrecol tradition.



Besenwirtschaft (seasonal tavern in vineyard) in Radebeul (Photo: Christine Martins)

Sunday morning: Lessons learnt and way forward

On Sunday morning, the participants reflected on the lessons learnt during the weekend meeting about networking and multistakeholder partnerships as practised for the past over 20 years by Prolinnova. They also discussed how Agrecol could contribute to the Prolinnova initiative. This session was moderated by Jochen. Some of the main points raised were:

We need to accept the current reality that mainstream researchers have difficulties in accepting a PID approach. On the other hand, PID could benefit from closer linkages with scientists. Some of the current applied research, such as the experimentation by farmers in Farmer Field Schools, could be combined with the approach of promoting local innovation and PID. Issues around defining research questions and maintaining scientific standards will remain difficult.

A paradigm shift is needed in the roles of researchers, so that they first look at what is being developed locally and facilitate partnership between farmers and relevant specialists. Scientists should be encouraged to examine their own belief systems. They need to live up to the expectations of farmer innovators. This will help to build up the confidence of farmers in such partnerships to a level where the farmers start expressing their “demands” in the partnership, not just accepting what the researchers want to do.

It will be important to continue reflecting on how to support the PID process at different scales. This could include trying to influence the ARD system by actively promoting the PID approach when reviewing proposals for donors, getting supportive people into key positions in ARD, and advocating for longer-term funding. Donors that require a participatory approach in ARD play a particularly positive role.

The value of networking was stressed as a way of encouraging each other in promoting participatory approaches. This involves also identifying interested individuals in ARD organisations and drawing them into the network. The PK members felt that Agrecol offered a lesson on the importance of building and maintaining a network of like-minded people who create occasions to exchange and support each other with ideas and experience – a group of friends who are interested in what each other is doing, sharing a welcoming and appreciative culture. Moreover, the Agrecol Association provides members with a legal entity through which they can apply for project funding. Agrecol could help in making the PID approach known also among ARD actors in the North.

The PK members at the workshop expressed their wish to maintain a strong relationship with Agrecol members, for instance, in linking with donors in the North and in acting as a sounding board when writing concept notes and project proposals and possibly even co-implementing research and development projects. PK would be prepared to host Agrecol interns, ideally in a tandem with interns from Kenya or elsewhere in Africa. Agrecol could also link PK more strongly with other German-based partners such as DITSL or University of Hohenheim to co-develop proposals.

Farewell

We rounded off the weekend meeting with a joint lunch in the centre of the beautiful town of Radebeul. The Kenyan guests then left for a brief tour of organic farms in Radebeul and near Dresden and Tharandt, before flying back to Nairobi. One of the Agrecol members, Christoph Arndt, who unfortunately could not be in Germany for this weekend meeting, generously made his small bus available for the tour.



Kenyan visitors discussing with Johannishöhe farmer Milana (Photo: Lorenz Bachmann)

Postscript: Mail from Vincent Mariadho after his return to Nairobi

Dear Agrecol Family,

I am writing to sincerely thank you for allowing us to be part of the Agrecol Autumn meeting in Radebeul.

The sessions were indeed very great and insightful, and we got to learn a lot, not only about what Agrecol is all about but also how to keep and facilitate a loose network of friends and professionals to create an impact in the society. The visits to the vineyards, the organic farm and the Johannishöhe farm were awesome. The evening round-info moment at Susanne's family house was really interesting.

Prolinnova–Kenya is very much open and always very ready to work closely with you, whether through your projects here in Kenya and/or participating in your North-based activities such as meetings, conferences, workshops etc.

Finally, I also want to really thank Susanne for hosting us in her family house. You for sure made us feel very much at home, away from home.

We appreciate all your efforts, time and resources that enabled us to have a very successful trip in Germany.

Cheers!

Vincent Mariadho, Prolinnova–Kenya Coordinator

Annex 1: Participants

- Ann Waters-Bayer
- Berthold Schrimpf
- Christine Martins
- Corinne Bothe
- Fanos Mekonnen
- Felix Herzog
- Hussein Wario
- Jochen Currle
- Lorenz Bachmann
- Lynn Julen
- Rebecca Dero
- Sibylle Pich
- Steffen Wiese
- Susanne Hofmann-Souki
- Vincent Mariadho
- Wolfgang Bayer

Report compiled by Ann Waters-Bayer, Fanos Mekonnen and Jochen Currle