

Exchanging knowledge about markets with innovators: experiences from an ongoing participatory research project on institutional innovations

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Beginning in 2013, INRA and FAO put out a call for papers on innovations that linked sustainable agriculture with local markets in developing countries. Fifteen papers were selected from 87 submissions and the collaboration began. The original research question that drove the writing of the call for papers was the result of collaborative work between three women (one academic and two UN officers) who had been working on the impacts of voluntary standards on small-scale producers' access to markets. One of the points that became increasingly clear was that local institutions were fundamental to whether or not smallholders accessed markets for sustainable products. We moved from this work to try to understand how it was that access to markets could incentivize the adoption of the sustainable practices that are included in the standards – because this is the objective of gaining certification in the end. Between 2013 and 2015, we collaborated with innovation intermediaries in 14 different countries to develop systematic and comparable case studies (FAO 2016), that we then analysed using theories of Institutional Innovations (Hargrave and Van De Ven 2006), actor-network analysis (Latour 2005), and functions of innovation systems (Hekkert et al. 2007). I visited 10 of the case studies, conducted interviews and observations and we organized two international researcher-practitioner workshops to discuss the method, the results and the challenges that are involved in transitioning to more sustainable food systems. Since 2016, I have been facilitating a set of working groups (5 groups of 5 people each) as we collectively pool together our knowledge to provide practical guidance on how to innovate around bottlenecks that consistently pose challenges to the efforts to make changes in local food systems. As a contribution to this session, I would like to reflect upon my role in this intermediation process and what collaborative and participatory research at the international level might be able to contribute to the study and practice of sustainable food system transformations.

References:

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