

## **Week on Agricultural Innovation in Africa**

*by Sonali Bisht, PROLINNOVA–India*

Innovations reveal creativity in foresight visioning, problem solving, setting and achieving goals with desired outcomes. When the goal is a public good – food security, poverty alleviation, meeting challenges of climate change – many minds and concerted action are required. Innovation is a multi-stakeholder process involving co-creation of knowledge and action. While innovation is now being widely discussed in agricultural research and development circles, creating effective structures and systems to operationalise and realise the benefits of innovation poses many challenges.

In the week of 25–31 May, Nairobi was the venue for a series of events and meetings on agricultural innovation. The objective was to learn jointly about agricultural innovation processes and systems in Africa, to identify policy implications, to develop policy-dialogue strategies and messages, and to explore perspectives for collaborative action research on innovation in smallholder farming.

The events were co-hosted by the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI), PROLINNOVA (an international multistakeholder platform that promotes local innovation, including farmer-led experimentation), the JOLISAA (Joint Learning in Innovation Systems in African Agriculture) project, the CCAFS (Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security) research project of the CGIAR, the Australian Government (AusAID) and several Kenya-based organisations, including Agri-Hub Kenya.

The event began where such events should begin – showcasing the creative strength and innovativeness of smallholder farmers living in resource-poor rural communities. KARI hosted a fair involving farmer innovators from the eastern African countries of Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. Fifty farmers came with innovations that were relevant across country boundaries and addressed needs, problems and challenges of many smallholder farmers. Many of the low-cost innovations were exciting for people working with farmers anywhere in the world and included locally developed feedstuffs, fuel-saving cooking pots, hybrid beehives, greenhouses made of empty plastic water bottles and labour-saving water-lifting devices.

The farmers occupied centre stage at the Eastern African Farmer Innovation Fair (EAFIF). In the four countries involved, the PROLINNOVA Country Platforms – multistakeholder networks focused on identifying, supporting and promoting farmer innovation – made this happen. For the farmers, it was a unique experience to be valued for their contribution to agriculture and celebrated by formal researchers. The farmers spoke, while scientists and others listened. It was a reversal of roles. It was also a sign of hope about changes to come – the recognition of innovative farmers as co-creators of agricultural knowledge and practice.

The Agricultural Innovation Systems in Africa (AISA) workshop, which opened with and followed the EAFIF, comprised about 100 participants representing a broad spectrum of stakeholder types and origins concerned with and involved in agricultural innovation system issues from the conceptual, implementation or policy angle. The workshop was inaugurated with a visit to the fair, interaction with farmer innovators and drawing lessons from the experience. Indeed, this grounded the workshop participants and put resource-poor smallholder farmers with their immense creativity, enthusiasm and expectations from policy- and decision-makers at the forefront of consciousness.

True to its purpose, the workshop was innovative, too. It was a highly interactive participatory event based on facilitated sharing and joint learning rather than on individual presentations. Experiences and evidence from across Africa were shared through posters set up at an interactive marketplace. The highlight was a living keynote developed jointly by participants by the end of the workshop. It is an amazingly rich document with some guides and many areas for further exploration and study by researchers as well as communities of practice. The process documentation and the keynote can be found on the AISA wiki (<http://aisa2013.wikispaces.com>) for wider circulation and access.