Fostering social learning and innovation to transform Australian food security international aid and development programs: insights from moving from theory to practice

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Abstract

Food insecurity is a ‘wicked’ sustainable development problem, which is being addressed by a range of stakeholders across multiple scales and jurisdictions. Despite the investment of millions of dollars from international donors in food security development programs and projects, positive impacts are isolated and hard to scale out. In Australia, a multi-agency...
initiative was established in 2012 between AusAID (subsequently integrated into the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade - DFAT), the Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and the Australian Centre for International Agriculture Research (ACIAR) alongside the Australian International Food Security Research Centre (AIFSRC). In partnership with professionals in Australian-supported projects in four developing regions, the Food Systems Innovation (FSI) initiative’s aim has been to investigate past successes and failures and, through a governance experiment, use these lessons to purposefully transform the structure and practice of Australian food security international aid and development programs. The FSI initiative explicitly applies complex adaptive systems and resilience thinking to food security issues, with a focus on facilitating innovation towards sustainable and resilient food security through cross-scale, multi-stakeholder knowledge sharing, joint learning and collective actions (i.e. social learning). This is being achieved through activities, resources, and tools focused on three food security themes (market-based approaches and public-private partnerships; nutrition-sensitive agriculture; and theories of change and livelihood impact pathways approaches) that explicitly link policy-making arenas in Australia and programs and projects in Africa and Asia. While social learning is increasingly seen as a critical foundation for enhancing innovation and resilience, particularly in the context of governance around complex problems such as food insecurity, putting it into practice is in itself highly complex and challenging. Moreover, while there are many initiatives that aim to foster learning and innovation, relatively few have explicit monitoring and evaluation frameworks and tools for capturing and assessing the learning processes and innovation outcomes. This presentation highlights the insights gained to-date from the FSI initiative’s journey in fostering collective knowledge-to-action for enhanced food security interventions, and its attempts to monitor, evaluate, and learn along the way.

**Keywords:** food security, international development, innovation, social learning, practice