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Setting-up Demand-driven Innovation Communication Platforms in Trans-Frontier Conservation Areas in Zimbabwe: Promises and Pitfalls

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Abstract

This paper presents the opportunities that are associated with establishing donor-funded ‘demand-driven’ Innovation Communication Platforms (ICPs) in Trans-frontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs). A mixed-methods approach was used to identify organisations and institutions working with farmers in agriculture and natural resources management. Participatory validation and planning workshops were first used to validate the data that was collected during participatory diagnosis. Secondly, possible interventions that communities could implement to address opportunities or challenges were jointly identified. Research methods included Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), participant observation, and a closed-ended questionnaire. Data analysis was performed using statistical packages as well as descriptive narratives from SSIs, FGDs, and secondary data sources from which both qualitative and quantitative data was generated. Organisational data (lists of actors and institutions involved in agriculture and NRM) was analysed using Free-List Analysis under Microsoft Excel (FLAME) to generate Excel charts showing the relative salience of each organisation. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data on the different activities being implemented by farmer groups in the study sites. Results from this study show that numerous stakeholders are supporting agriculture with limited organisations engaging in wildlife conservation in the study sites. These organisations include government departments, farmer groups, non-governmental organisations, research and the private sector that can sustain the emergency of demand -driven ICPs. The findings demonstrate that collaborative engagement, modelled along participatory activities from the onset, enables stakeholders to collectively identify opportunities and challenges and formulate issue specific intervention plans. Evident in all the study sites were iterative processes involving all ICP members from the onset and throughout the life cycle of the platform activities at the ward level. Results show that ICP establishment process can suffer from a number of pitfalls including elite

capture, setting up at inappropriate level, conflict, trust deficits, divergent and sometimes competing interests and priorities among platform members. Recommendations from the study include the accurate identification of key organisations and farmer groups during participatory diagnosis, validation and planning processes which set the basis for a robust foundation for the establishment of demand-driven ICPs.

Keywords: *Innovation Communication Platforms; Trans-Frontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs); Participatory Diagnosis and Planning (PDP); Validation; Action planning*

Introduction

This paper presents the results of a study that sought to establish demand-driven Innovation and Communication Platforms (ICPs) at the ward level in TFCAs. ICPs are now widely being endorsed by research and development agencies that fall under the global umbrella of organisations that promote agricultural innovation, known as the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centres (CGIAR), as an effective approach for improving agricultural outcomes at the farmer level (Schut et al., 2024). These agencies operate using the Agricultural Innovation Systems Approach (AISA). In this particular study, a component of AISA known as Participatory Diagnosis and Planning (PDP) was adopted to establish ICPs at ward level. The methodology was used to build ICPs based on existing forms of collective action at local level (van der Schans and Lemperiere, 2006a; Dabire et al., 2017). ICPs were also developed with the aim of avoiding the major pitfalls that are associated with externally driven interventions that are widely known to undermine sustainability (Boogaard et al., 2013; Naku and Afrane, 2013). While the paper does not purport that the ICPs which were created using the PDP framework, will be functional in the long-run, evidence so far shows that stakeholders in agriculture and wildlife conservation can collaboratively identify problems, develop solutions, plan, implement, and jointly monitor and evaluate activities. To achieve these stages, it is essential to involve all ICP members in iterative processes from the onset rather than mid-cycle (Schut et al., 2024; Gobvu et al., 2025; Triomphe et al., 2025)

The Agricultural Innovation Systems Approach (AISA) has emerged as the major research and development approach to deliver socio-economic benefits to smallholder farmers and to promote stewardship over wildlife living within and outside rural communities. This approach is largely prompted by global development agencies, particularly those in the CGIAR system (Nederlof, Wongtschowski and Van Der Lee, 2011; Cullen et al., 2013; Pham, Cadilhon and Maass, 2015; Schut et al., 2018; Téno and Cadilhon, 2018; Eidt et al., 2020). Central to AISA is the promotion of Innovation Platforms (IPs) whose pillar is ‘iterative learning’ involving multi-stakeholders, including smallholder farmers, local level state agencies (extension staff), private sector agencies, researchers, and policy makers (Dabire et al., 2017; Toillier et al., 2018). A central tenet shared by this assemblage is that IPs are capable of collaboratively identifying systemic challenges, co-designing context specific solutions, implementing these interventions and iteratively refining strategies through reflexive learning (Pham, Cadilhon and Maass, 2015; Dror et al., 2016; Fatunbi et al., 2016; Davies et al., 2016; Triomphe et al., 2025). There is increasing evidence showing that if these processes are well articulated, IPs are capable of bringing about positive outcomes at scale

(Schut et al., 2018). Identified pitfalls for the successful implementation of IPs include undefined and competing interests, elite capture, political interference and free riding (Boogaard et al., 2013; Dror et al., 2016).

Literature shows the importance of identifying key stakeholders that will contribute positively towards the establishment and life-cycle of an innovation platform (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997; Fatunbi et al., 2015; Schut et al., 2015; Kimaiyo et al., 2017; Dabire et al., 2017; Ameru et al., 2023). The importance of stakeholders in innovation processes is revealed by the increasing popularity and recognition of stakeholder analysis in research on IPs (Brugha and Varvasovszky, 2000; Mckitterick et al., 2016). Measurement of stakeholder importance is conducted using salience, and stakeholder salience is based on three typologies, namely, high, intermediate and low salience (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997; Hillman and Keim, 2001; Achterkamp and Vos, 2007; Sripun, Yongvanit, and Pratt, 2017). Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997) propose a correlation between stakeholder salience and the cumulative number of stakeholder attributes (power, legitimacy and urgency), where a stakeholder with all three attributes is considered to have high salience while a stakeholder with only one attribute is considered to have low salience. A user-friendly computational method has emerged in the form of free listing to determine stakeholder salience using frequency of mention or Sutrop index (Sutrop, 2001; Quilan, 2019).

While IPs are widely presented as a panacea to productivity and sustainability challenges that are currently bedevilling smallholder farmers, they are embedded in complexity. This complexity is largely multi-layered and sometimes characterised by diverging stakeholder interests and expectations which may contribute to their collapse at various stages of their life cycles (Nederlof, Wongtschowski and Van Der Lee, 2011; Makini et al., 2015; Faure et al., 2016). Evidence from the Zimbabwean context reveals a nuanced picture of both promises and pitfalls during ICP establishment and implementation. For instance, the Zimbabwe Small Ruminants Livestock Innovation Platform (LILI Markets/ZimGoats) Innovation Platform in Mwenezi district, South-western Zimbabwe is among a number of case studies that shows the promises that are brought about by pitching the IP at ward level. The case study also shows the importance of the accurate identification and inclusion of key stakeholders from the initial IP establishment stages, co-identification of problems and opportunities and solution seeking processes and joint implementation of proposed actions (Faure et al., 2016; Birachi et al., 2013). This is corroborated by Ncube et al. (2025), whose study shows that the establishment of agricultural IPs at the ward level, building into district IPs with all relevant stakeholders, fosters collective action, bargaining power, social cohesion, increased productivity, and higher incomes. Literature shows that during the initial stages of IP establishment, stakeholders may have divergent interest and perceptions, conflicts as well as power asymmetries resulting in non-participation of marginalised individuals or groups, risk of elite capture, as well as mistrust.

However, navigating the initial stages of IP establishment remains challenging. Literature indicates that stakeholders often possess divergent interests, conflicting perceptions, and power asymmetries that can lead to mistrust or the exclusion of marginalised groups (Boogaard et al., 2013; Mahiya, I.T., 2020; Ncube et al., 2025). Because of these inherent trust deficits and competing interests, IPs are not neutral spaces. Their establishment and implementation processes are deeply entrenched in power dynamics that dictate who participates and who benefits. If unaddressed, these power differences can trigger severe conflicts and ultimate platform collapse.

Elite capture represents another critical pitfall, as influential actors may hijack the platform's agenda to fulfil personal interests or monopolise benefits at the expense of poor and marginalised members, causing disenfranchised stakeholders to exit. Furthermore, structural failure can occur if an IP is established at an inappropriate institutional level. For example, the EU-DREAM project in Zimbabwe initially established agriculture and wildlife ICPs at the Transfrontier level. Upon realising that farmers were largely inactive, coordination was difficult, and local actors were crowded out by the elites and technocrats who dominated TFCA-wide meetings, the project subsequently relocated the ICPs to the ward level (Tembani et al., 2017). Ultimately, these case studies underscore the need for explicit attention to power dynamics, skilled facilitation, and precise stakeholder inclusion from the outset. Furthermore, the heavy dependency on non-governmental organisation (NGO) funding cycles and uneven donor engagement threatens the long-term sustainability of these initiatives. Addressing these contrasting experiences requires context-sensitive designs and robust, multi-stakeholder participatory approaches (Faure et al., 2016; de Romemont, Macombe and Faure, 2018). The processes articulated in this paper provide a strong theoretical and practical foundation for resilient ICP establishment and implementation.

Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods approach that relied primarily on an inductive framework using qualitative data collection methods. It was complemented by a minor deductive component that utilised quantitative techniques. This approach was employed to gather comprehensive data on existing forms of local organisations (specifically farmer groups and entities implementing agriculture and NRM activities), as well as the socio-demographic characteristics of the informants. Furthermore, the methodology captured the systemic problems and opportunities that are faced by farmers at the ward level; which informed subsequent validation and action-planning processes. To systematically identify and prioritise these local challenges and organisational structures, free listing was utilised during initial focus group discussions and key informant interviews. This qualitative technique allowed for an unbiased prioritisation of farmer needs thereby, ensuring that the established ICPs were genuinely demand-driven and grounded in community realities.

Study sites

The study was conducted at ward level in two TFCA districts namely: Hwange in Kavango-Zambezi (KAZA TFCA) and Chiredzi in the Great-Limpopo (GL-TFCA). In Hwange, the study was conducted in Ward 15 (Silewu) and Ward 2 (Chidobe) while in Chiredzi the study was conducted in Ward 15 (Malipati) and Ward 16 (Nandi). Figure 1 shows the study sites which were selected because they share similarities in terms of agro-ecological zones, biophysical characteristics, farming practices, as well as their proximity to national protected wildlife areas. The communities in the four study sites share similar challenges and opportunities related to agriculture and natural resource endowments.

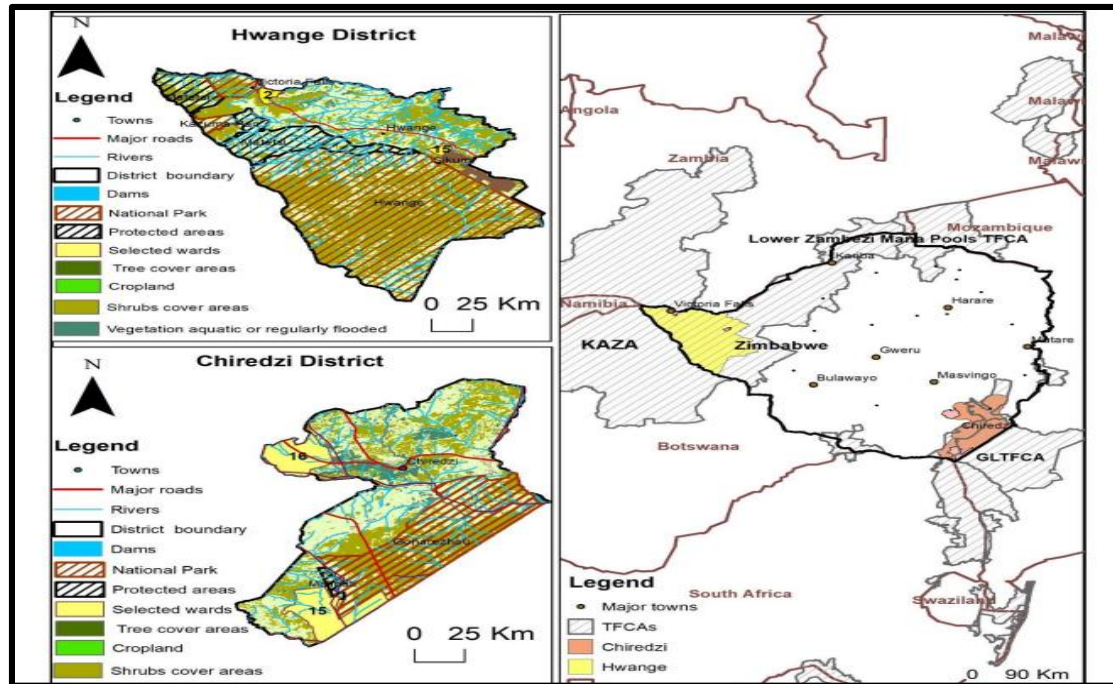


Figure 1: Study sites

Sampling methods and sample sizes

To capture a comprehensive overview of the institutional landscape, this study utilised a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques across multiple levels. At the district and ward levels, key informants for SSIs ($n=32$) were selected using purposive sampling. To guide this process, the researchers developed an initial sampling frame from grey literature through compiling a list of prominent actors in agriculture and natural resource management (NRM) within the study sites. This included government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), research institutes, community-based organisations (CBOs) as well as environmental and community trusts.

Snowball sampling was then deployed to identify additional relevant respondents who were not captured in the initial grey literature review. At the ward level, farmer groups that are actively involved in agriculture and NRM were purposively selected to participate in FGDs ($n=21$). A quantitative questionnaire was administered to all farmer group members ($n=180$) who attended the FGDs, SSIs, and subsequent validation and planning workshops to gather socio-demographic data. Furthermore, purposive sampling was used to invite 130 participants ($n=130$) to the validation and planning workshops. This cohort comprised farmer group leaders, community leaders, staff from various government departments, and representatives from research and private-sector organisations. Table 1 outlines the specific sample sizes across the different data collection levels per ward within each of the two districts.

Table 1: Sample sizes for different data collection methods

District	Ward	Sample sizes			
		SSIs (n=32)	FGDs (n=21)	Questionnaire surveys (n=180)	Validation Planning workshops (n=130)
Hwange	Silewu	8	5	60	33
	Chidobe	7	5	40	33
Chiredzi	Malipati	9	6	50	38
	Nandi	8	5	30	26

Data collection process

The data collection process was executed in three sequential phases namely; literature review and establishing the sampling frame; participatory diagnosis (PD); and validation and action planning workshops. The first phase was to conduct a rigorous literature review to come up with a set of data on organisations implementing agriculture and NRM activities in the study sites. The secondary data served as the foundational basis for purposively selecting key informants who included both individuals and institutional representatives for the semi-structured interviews (SSIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs) that were conducted during the data collection stage. The second phase comprised a participatory diagnosis (PD) to conduct an institutional mapping ('who is doing what') regarding agriculture and NRM in the study sites. This diagnostic exercise intended to identify the fundamental institutional elements that are necessary to support and sustain the emergence of Innovation and Communication Platforms (ICPs) within Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs). The PD captured the local challenges and perceived opportunities at both district and ward levels. Qualitative data collection instruments included SSIs, FGDs, and participant observation. Concurrently, quantitative questionnaires were administered to the qualitative informants to gather standardized socio-demographic data. The third phase involved ward level validation and planning workshops which lasted two and half days in each study site. The workshops were divided into two distinct sessions namely: 1/ validation of PD results and, 2/ planning. The workshops utilised an interactive, participatory format consisting of plenary presentations followed by small-group breakout sessions. In these breakout groups, 8 to 10 participants collaboratively discussed assigned tasks and co-designed localised strategies. The final phase entailed transcribing all qualitative data that was generated from the SSIs and FGDs across the study sites. This process standardised the qualitative text datasets to prepare them for the subsequent formal data analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis included a statistical and content analysis of quantitative and qualitative data. Organisational data (lists of actors and institutions involved in agriculture and NRM) was analysed using Free-List Analysis under Microsoft Excel (FLAME) to generate Excel charts showing relative salience or the perceived importance of each organisation using the Frequency of mention and Smith index. Thematic analysis was used to analyse data on the different activities being implemented by farmer groups, as well as the challenges and opportunities in the study sites.

Results

Forms of organisations and institutions involved in agriculture and NRM

Results indicate a mix of formal and informal organisations and institutions that support farmers in agriculture and NRM activities, at both the district and ward levels. These organisations depicted different levels of salience. The organisations vary from government departments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), private sector (though not very common), and research institutes. These organisations offer a number of services ranging from training, extension, advisory, and in-kind provision of inputs. Remarkably, results show weak ties between different organisations and farmer groups. Each organisation delivers services to farmer groups at ward level in an uncoordinated fashion, to the extent that sometimes these organisations supporting the same farmer/farmer group at different intervals. Farmer group interlinkages are also weak, even though farmer groups in the same ward are implementing almost similar activities and being supported by similar organisations.

Formal organisations

There are a number of organisations that are providing support to farmer groups involved in agriculture and NRM activities. Results indicate three distinct categories of organisations according to salience index (Smith and Frequency of mention). The first category is made up of organisations with a high salience index (Figures 2 and 3). There are more organisations in this category in Hwange (19 organisations) compared to Chiredzi (15 organisations). In Hwange, (Figure 2) 10 of these organisations are government agencies namely, Agricultural Extension Services (AGRITEX), Forestry Commission, Environment Management Agency (EMA), Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, Veterinary Services Department, District Development Fund (DDF), Department of Social Welfare, Ministry of Education, Hwange Rural District Council, and Livestock Production Division (LPD). These organisations provide various services; mainly extension and regulatory services to farmers. The remaining 9 are NGOs, and inter-governmental organisations. These include World Vision, Environment Africa, African Centre for Holistic Management (ACHM), Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Catholic Development Commission (CADEC), Southern Alliance for Indigenous Resources (SAFIRE), SNV, Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), and Organisation for Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP). This cluster of organisations mainly provide agricultural inputs and extension advice to farmers.

In Chiredzi (Figure 3), 15 organisations were classified as having high salience, 9 are government departments and these include, AGRITEX, Chiredzi RDC, Veterinary Services Department, Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority, EMA, Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), Livestock Production Division, Women Affairs and Department of Social Welfare. The remaining 6 are NGOs and these include, Plan International, International Rescue Committee (IRC), GIZ, SAFIRE, Care International and CACLAZ. The support services offered to farmers by this cluster of organisations are similar to those indicated above.

Furthermore, results show that on average a total of 11 organisations in both sites have an intermediate salience. This cluster consists of government departments, NGOs/CBOs and research institutes such as ICRISAT in Chiredzi which is conducting animal feed trails with farmers. Lastly, the third cluster of organisations were categorised under low salience. The findings indicate that, on average, 29 organisations in both study sites (Chiredzi and Hwange) fall under the low salience category. Most of these are private companies. Their interaction with farmer organisations is primarily based on corporate social responsibility and the selling of agricultural inputs. However, these inputs were reported to be pegged at high prices, especially when they are brought directly to farmers at the ward level.

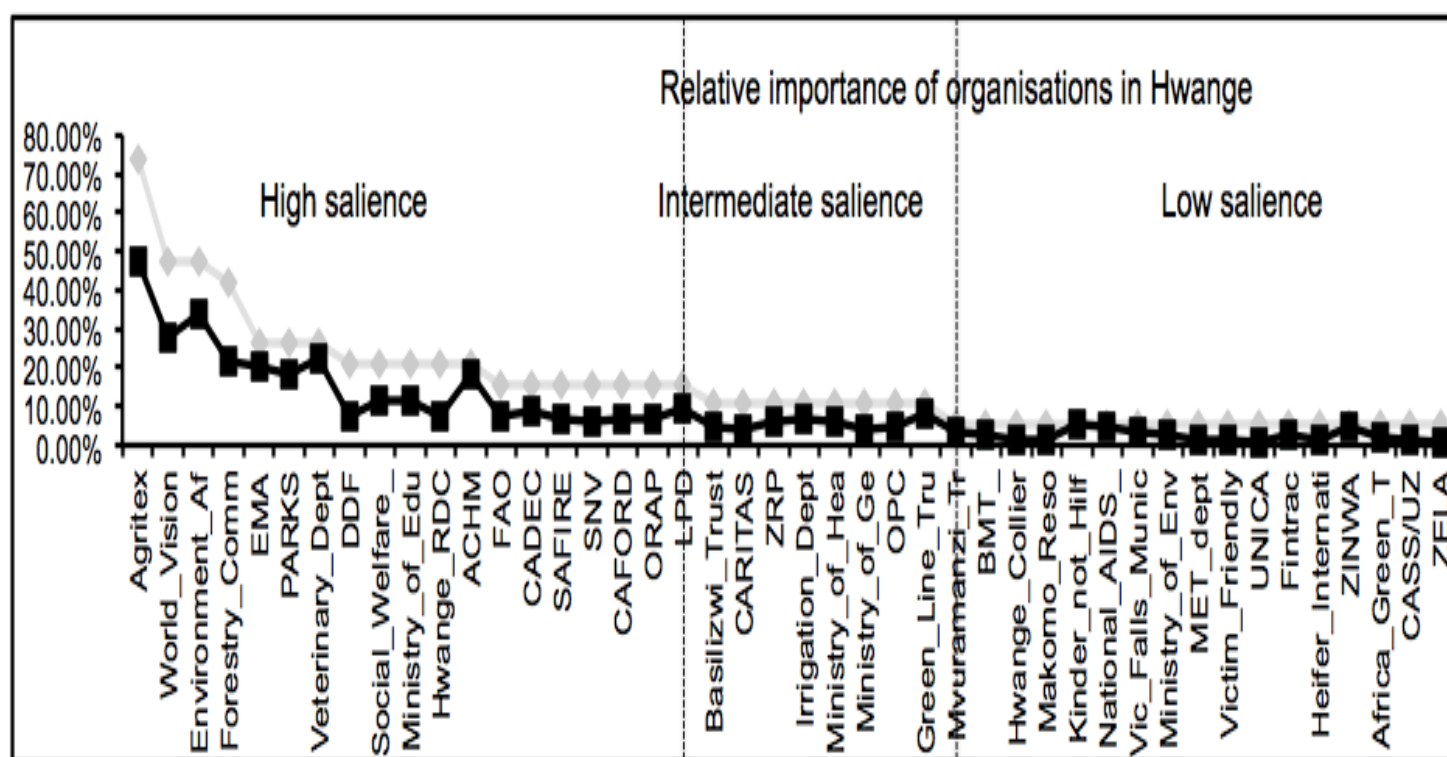


Figure 2: Organisations supporting farmer groups in Hwange -ranked according to relative importance

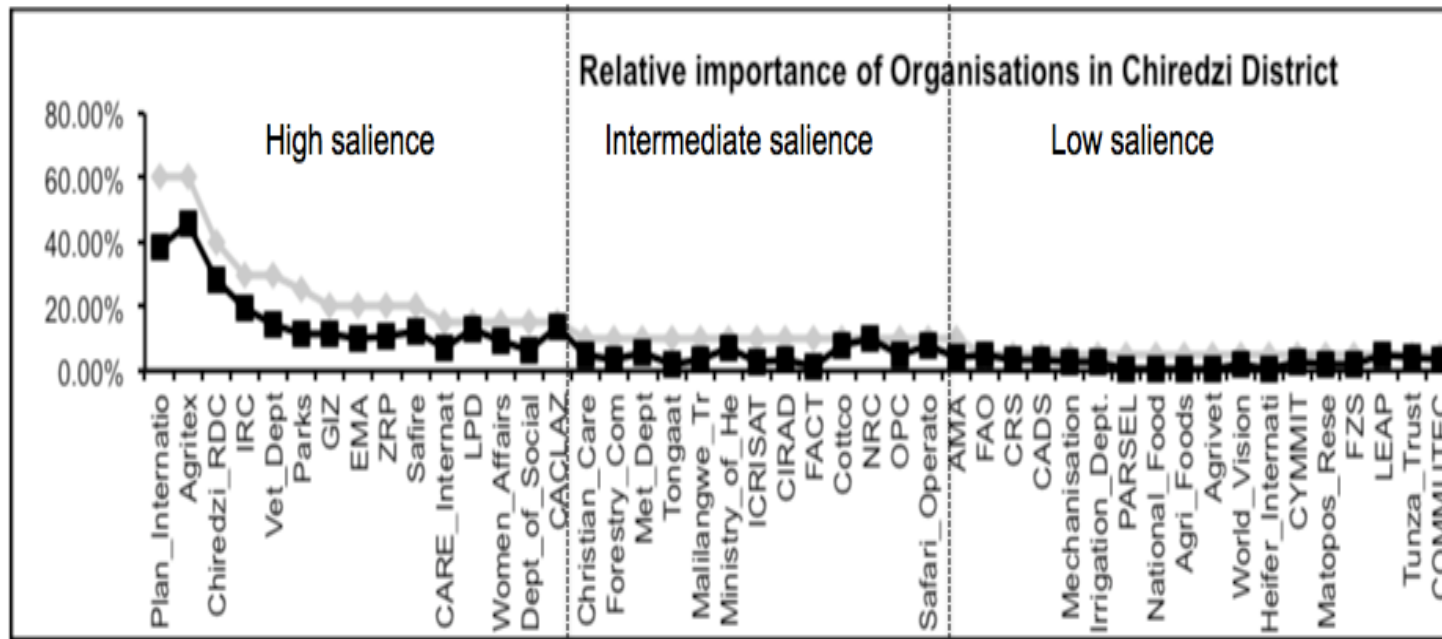


Figure 3: Organizations supporting farmer groups in Chiredzi -ranked according to relative importance

Informal Organisations

The institutional landscape across the study sites features a myriad of informal, unregistered farmer groups implementing agriculture and NRM activities. At the ward level, farmers organise themselves into these groups to collaborate with external entities across various thematic areas, including agriculture, NRM, water, sanitation, hygiene (WASH), and healthcare. A total of 21 groups implementing agriculture and NRM were interviewed as shown in Table 2 below. These farmer groups differ in composition, age, and operational activities, with the majority being informal and in their infancy. Their core operations generally fall into three distinct categories, including livestock farming, crop production and natural resource management. Livestock farming includes goat rearing, livestock fattening, and traditional collective cattle herding practices, such as the *Kulayijana* and *Boma* systems. Crop production activities include conservation farming, nutrition gardening, and cash crop production (specifically cotton and sesame). A few groups in both districts engage in natural resource utilisation and management under the Communal Areas Management Programme for Indigenous Resources (CAMPFIRE), as well as the production and sale of handmade crafts. Unlike the smaller agricultural groups, the CAMPFIRE, such as the

Malipati, Hlarweni and Chilotlela Development Trusts in Chiredzi District, and the Chidobe CAMPFIRE Group in Hwange, are characterised by exceptionally high membership rates. The activities they support are designed to benefit entire wards or clusters of villages. Revenue dividends generated from CAMPFIRE initiatives are typically reinvested into public infrastructure projects, including the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, schools, clinics, and community grinding mills. Structurally, similarities exist across farmer groups in terms of leadership structure. Key leadership positions, such as the chairperson, are generally held by men, except in a few groups that are either exclusively women-led or where men are not actively involved.

Table 2: Farmer groups in the study wards in Hwange and Chiredzi

District	Ward	Groups	Theme(s)	Group membership (No. of farmers)		Group timelines (Duration in years)	
				Mean± std	Range	Mean± std	Range
Hwange	Silweu	Chezhou; Goat Groups; Kulayijana; Sizimisele; Kubhantshana	Goat keeping; Cattle herding; Nutrition gardening; CA	18.6±9.23	10-29	3.8±2.51	2-8
	Chidobe	Siyaphambili; Bhatanani_CA; Bhatanani_Weaving;Kushinga;Bhatanani_ACHM; CAMPFIRE,	NRM (holistic management, CAMPFIRE); CA; Basket weaving	60.7±117.32	10-300	7.8±12.22	1-32
Chiredzi	Malipati	Magogogwe; Malipati Development Trust; Hlarweni (CAMPFIRE); Seed Multiplication; Chilotlela (CAMPFIRE)	Nutrition gardening; NRM (CAMPFIRE); seed production	211.2±163.41	35- 400	14.2±7.43	6-22
	Nandi	Bhomba; Budiro; Tashinga; Chikoforo; Gutsaruzhinji	Crop production (cotton, sesame); Pan fattening; CA	27.2±13.45	15-50	4.6±4.25	2-12

Results indicate a longer history of collective action among farmer groups implementing NRM activities compared to those focused on agriculture. This longevity implies that NRM groups have acquired substantial collective experience in joint project implementation, suggesting that they possess a stronger foundation for establishing successful Innovation and Communication Platforms (ICPs). Furthermore, NRM groups benefit from "safety in numbers" due to the community-wide collective action approach that is inherent in frameworks like the CAMPFIRE. This broad structural base fosters a greater diversity of skills, competencies, and local knowledge compared to smaller, fragmented, agriculture-based groups.

Group membership

Group membership varies considerably, ranging from as few as 10 to as many as 400 members, as shown in Table 2. Large membership is associated with CAMPFIRE and Community Development Groups (Malipati Development Trust). As already stated above, these groups are implementing NRM-related activities. Data from focus group discussions indicates that most groups have experienced at least some decline in membership at one point or another during their life cycle. One of the CAMPFIRE groups in Chiredzi had this to say concerning group membership:

‘The group has about three hundred and seventy (370) members from nine villages. There has been an increase in membership from 9 in 2006 when the group was formed to 370; currently. The figures, however, dropped drastically during the 2009–2012 period. This decline occurred because community members perceived no benefits from being in the group, as excessive inflation had eroded the local currency's value, preventing any cash flow for community projects. The figure started to rise again in 2013 after the dollarization of the economy and community projects were resumed attracting members back into the group’ (FGD member, Ward 15- Chiredzi, Oct. 2016).

External factors, particularly macroeconomic shocks, the termination of donor funding, and the introduction of new non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiatives emerged as the primary drivers of these membership fluctuations. This volatility is exemplified by the Magogogwe Nutrition Garden group in Chiredzi District (Figure 4). Originally initiated with financial backing from World Vision, the group experienced sharp contractions in membership when the organisation withdrew from the district following the expiration of its funding cycle. The project was subsequently revitalised through joint support from Plan International and the World Food Programme (WFP). One of the key informants from the group narrated the following in terms of membership fluctuations throughout the life cycle of the project:

‘Magogogwe Irrigation Scheme which was supported by World Vision started with 200 members in 1994. In 2009, World Vision pulled out of the district hence farmers were no longer receiving inputs and extension support from both World Vision and AGRITEX; respectively. Group members started to lose interest and were no longer coming to the garden. The figure dropped to zero between 2009 and 2012. The irrigation scheme was vandalised by other community members. For instance, the fence and pump were stolen, canals were also destroyed. In 2012, Plan International came and started supporting the irrigation scheme. Membership began to rise again after the rehabilitation of canals. Plan International also bought two engines and distributed garden tools and seeds through a food for assets programme funded by World Food Programme. Currently, the garden has 111 members’. (FGD member, Ward 15- Chiredzi, Oct. 2016)



Figure 4: Plan International and WFP reviving Magogogwe Irrigation Scheme, Chiredzi district

Validation and planning workshops: Identifying challenges and ICP focus

Results show that a total of 130 participants attended validation and planning workshops in the study sites (Figure 5). The workshops occurred in two main consecutive parts: firstly, the validation of PD results and secondly the planning sessions culminating into the development of specific action plans for each of the four-ward level ICPs. The first step sought to facilitate co-building of knowledge between farmers and other key stakeholders which contributed to joint ownership of PD results. During planning sessions challenges, solutions and activities were identified and consensually agreed upon for each ward-level ICP stakeholders and their roles. In terms of attendance during the workshops, farmers constituted by far the largest share of participants in both Chiredzi and Hwange ward-levels workshops (Figure 5). Malipati ward had the highest proportion of farmers (27 out of the 38 workshop participants) followed by Chidobe with 24 out of the total 33 participants and Nandi had the least (19 out of the 26 workshop participants). Some wards witnessed the participation of more stakeholders (other than farmers e.g., government officials, private sector, NGOs/CBOs staff, community leaders and researchers) than others, reflecting the actual number of organisations engaged with farmer groups, which is higher in some wards compared to others. For instance, higher proportions of other stakeholders were witnessed in Malipati (11 participants) and Silewu (10 participants), with the least in Nandi (7 participants).

Not all invited organisations that were identified as potential ICP stakeholders attended the workshops due to long distances and a case in point was Silewu ward where some stakeholders had to travel close to 400km from Bulawayo. Specifically, the private sector (Mvutshwa Abattoir) and an NGO (SNV) did not attend in Silewu ward, since they are domiciled in Bulawayo. It was reported that they did not attend the workshop despite being invited. One reason was their unclear understanding of how they would benefit from ICP membership. Additionally, the costs of attending the workshop were high, as they had to cover fuel, accommodation, and meals as these expenses were not faced by other stakeholders who reside near the ward centres. Traditional leaders were absent in Nandi ward mainly because in resettlement areas such institutions are state

imposed and largely domiciled in neighbouring communal areas. Further inquiry revealed that most traditional leaders rarely participate in activities within resettlement areas.

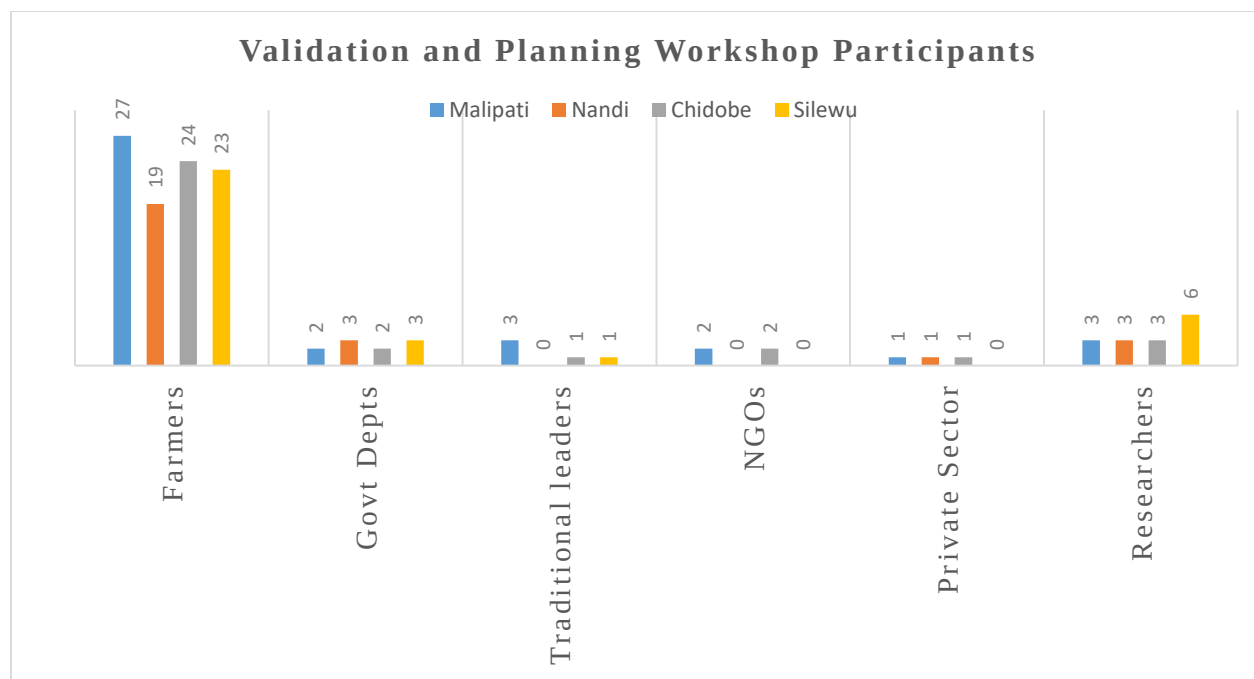


Figure 5: Stakeholder participation during Validation and Planning Workshops

During planning sessions, farmers were more able to articulate their needs, deriving confidence from their experiences and probably because of their higher numbers compared to any other stakeholder groups. The process of identifying which challenge to tackle or opportunity to pursue was not an easy one for all the wards. This was emanating from differences among stakeholders in conceptualising what constitutes a challenge/opportunity and lack of clear-cut understanding of concepts. For instance, farmers could not easily identify the root causes of the problems/challenges they were facing. Without identifying the root cause or challenge, it was also inherently difficult to come up with solutions to implement to solve the challenges. The list of challenges/opportunities formed the basis upon which ICP objectives and action plans were formulated (Table 3). The planning process required meticulous facilitation by the research team. With respect to stakeholder identification and their roles in the ICP, all groups were able to come up with lists of stakeholders who were deemed key in implementing the agreed objective and their roles. New stakeholders that were not mentioned during PD were identified and listed as key players. For example, all the wards identified the private sector and agro-dealers as key partners, with dual roles: acting as off-takers for their produce and providing essential agro-inputs. This underscored the farmers' commitment to produce for ready markets and using trusted relationships to negotiate viable prices and sustained trust.

Discussions during planning sessions were also articulated around which resources were needed for implementing the planned activities and how they were to be mobilised. Participants in all the study areas agreed to mobilise resources through monthly subscriptions to be paid by farmers. This

demonstrated the level of commitment towards implementing work plans and collective action. Other stakeholder groups like extension agents indicated continued support in the form of extension advice, while NGOs pledged agro-inputs and advisory support. Table 3 shows the prioritised challenges, solutions and stakeholders involved in ward-level ICPs. Silewu and Nandi wards opted for improved livestock production. During the PD process, the wards had indicated this as a challenge. Farmers in these wards indicated that they keep livestock in the form of cattle and goats and would like to expand this venture since there are readily available viable livestock markets. Malipati ward prioritised small grains seed production for sale, and horticulture production for sale was the plan for Chidobe. During PD data collection, farmers in Malipati reported that they face challenges to procure seed, especially small grains that adapt to the ward-level agro-ecological conditions. They also mentioned that there are acute shortages of small grains seed and the few suppliers in the ward tend to charge high prices. Other seed markets are far away (approximately 150km) and the road network is poor. Under such conditions, growing seed locally appeared viable with extension support from Matopo Research Station and resident AGRITEX extension staff. Respondents in Chidobe ward reported an insatiable demand for horticultural produce by hotels and restaurants in the nearby resort town of Victoria Falls.

Table 3: List of challenges, solutions and stakeholders in ward-level ICPs

District/ Ward	Challenge	How to address the challenge	Stakeholders
Hwange Silewu Ward	Unavailability of markets for livestock	Objective: Improved livestock production for sale Activities -Offer practical training on fodder production to farmers -Grow fodder crops for cattle fattening -Introduce livestock auctions in the ward -Establish linkages with abattoirs	Veterinary Services Department; Livestock Production Department; ICP farmers, abattoirs; Kushanthliwa, Tomutobela and Lukwejo Goat Groups, SNV, E. Africa, CIRAD, Lion Research, Zimbabwe Republic Police, agro-dealers, Matopo Research Institute, Traditional leaders
Hwange Chidobe Ward	Lack/limited linkages with local markets for horticulture crops	Objective: Increased horticulture production for sale Activities - Develop cropping programme and train farmers in horticulture production -Engage supermarkets and hotels in Victoria Falls and secure contracts. -Offer training on negotiating contracts and to capacitate	AGRITEX, ICP farmers, private sector buyers-Gorges Lodge, Plant Protection Unit, Greenline Trust, traditional leaders, Hope Foundation, Sizinda Agriculture Centre

		farmers to do contract farming.	
Chiredzi Malipati Ward	Limited markets for selling seed	Objective: Increased small grains seed production for sale Activities -Organise seed fairs at ward level -Engage seed experts and researchers for promoting farmers' seed	AGRITEX, buyers in and outside ward, Matopo Research Institute, Seed Multiplication Group, PLAN International, SAFIRE, Transporters, CIFOSUDE, ICP farmers, traditional leaders
Chiredzi Nandi Ward	Unavailability of markets for livestock	Objective: Increased livestock production for sale Activities -Offer practical training on fodder production for farmers -Grow fodder crops for cattle fattening -Conduct local auction sales for livestock	Livestock Production Department, Veterinary Services department, abattoirs (Koala), Zimbabwe Republic Police, ICP farmers, Budiriro Cattle Fattening Group, Triangle Ltd- Feed Section, Councillor, Makoholi Research Station, Women Affairs

Discussion

Results from this study confirm what other studies have already shown regarding ICPs establishment process as rarely a straightforward, step-by-step process. Instead, it involves many different stakeholders working together, and the process often requires continuous adjustments, co-learning, and flexibility along the way. Innovations scholarship present the process as dynamic, non-linear and iterative as it involves many stakeholders (Nederlof, Wongtschowski and Van Der Lee, 2011; Triomphe et al., 2016; Triomphe, et al., 2025; Vall, et al., 2025). It involves deploying one level of iteration after the other so as to accurately identify the stakeholders that can constitute ward-level ICPs, identify challenges/opportunities faced by farmers, develop realistic objectives as well as action plans to be implemented by farmers together with stakeholders. This paper highlights three iterations: (i) participatory diagnosis at the district level, (ii) participatory diagnosis at the ward level, and (iii) validation and planning workshops with prospective ICP stakeholders that should also be conducted at the ward level. These iterations are necessary in co-creating knowledge on who is doing what with farmers, as well as the challenges confronting farmers and the opportunities that they can pursue to improve their livelihoods. Furthermore, these feedback loops generate valuable information that can prevent the common pitfalls encountered when establishing ICPs. Some of the pitfalls may include establishing the ICP at the wrong level, being captured by elites, omitting key stakeholders or failing to identify the real challenge/opportunity that ICP stakeholders can focus on. Another risk is failing to identify context-sensitive solutions that require fewer external resources, as such solutions are essential for achieving long-term sustainability (Hounkonnou et al., 2012; Schut et al., 2015).

Innovation platforms can be established at three levels depending on the purpose for which they are being created for. The three levels include; the operational (village, ward or district level), intermediary level (provincial/TFCA), and policy level (national) as shown in Figure 6. Alternative literature classifies this hierarchy using the micro, meso, and macro designations, respectively. At

the operational level, platforms seek to solve practical challenges or leverage opportunities, by linking farmers with key stakeholders to co-design and achieve a common objective (Tucker et al., 2013; Makini et al., 2015; Ncube et al., 2025).

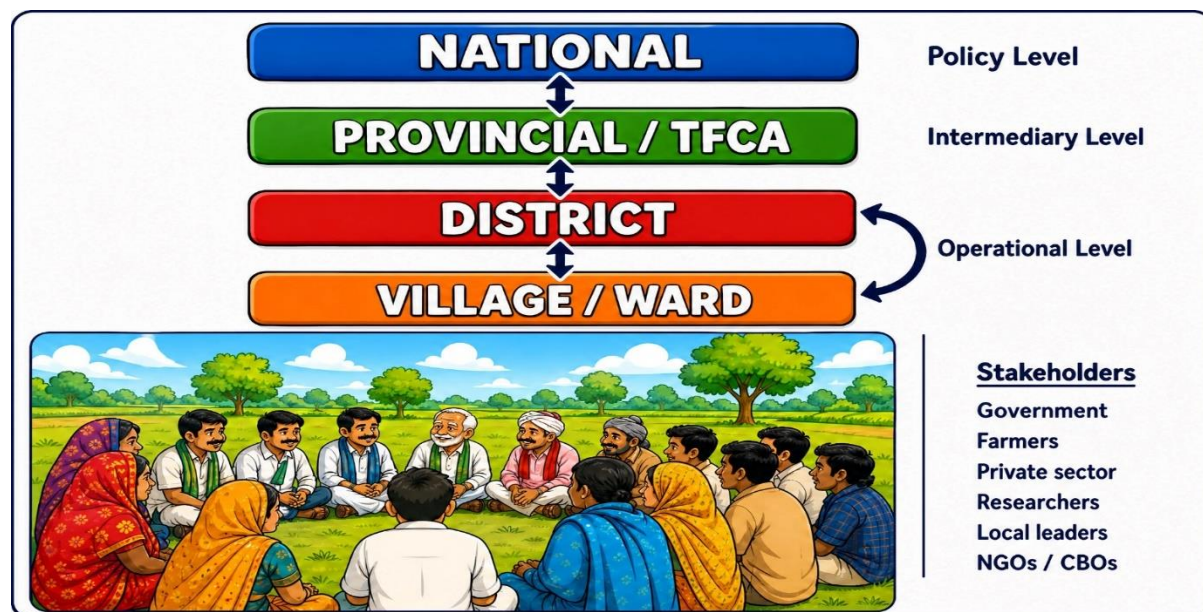


Figure 6: ICP levels (adapted from Tucker et al (2013))

Establishing ICPs at a level where farmers are underrepresented or lack the agency to implement activities often triggers premature platform collapse, primarily due to the absence of viable, localised activities that farmers can actively engage in (Dror et al., 2016, Mahiya, 2020; Vall et al., 2025). For instance, in this study, initial ICPs that were established by the EU-DREAM project were pitched at TFCA (intermediary) level and were characterised by loosely defined membership and not solving specific problems for farmers. Instead, their primary activities consisted of quarterly workshops dominated by elites and technocrats, resulting in minimal farmer participation and immediate elite capture. This elite dominance marginalised farmers, reducing them to passive participants with little meaningful input during workshops. Consequently, no structural space was created to foster demand-driven farmer innovation or to pursue grassroots opportunities. In contrast, the results of this study demonstrate great potential for farmer-led innovation at the ward level where a dense network of smallholders is already executing numerous agriculture and NRM activities. The findings show that these farmer groups are not working in a vacuum, but are working with a number of organisations such as government departments and NGOs/CBOs in providing different goods and services.

While the diversity of the organisations operating at the district and ward levels offers a promising foundation for establishing ICPs, relying solely on institutional salience indices is inadequate for determining an organisation's suitability or capacity to sustain platform functionality. Reed et al. (2009) provide a stakeholder analysis framework to better understand organisational attributes and effectiveness. This approach is highly useful for evaluating an organisation's specific interests, institutional legitimacy, and power dynamics relative to other ICP stakeholders and the

overarching platform objectives. Ultimately, the high density of organisations across the study sites establishes a baseline for institutional complementarity and synergy building, both of which are critical success factors during the inception phases of ward-level ICPs (Kamanda, Birner and Bantilan, 2017). However, the noticeable absence of the private sector in some study sites leaves a distinct window of opportunity for the ICP establishment process to identify and integrate these crucial stakeholders. In the context of the EU-DREAM project, it was also important to link TFCA-wide ICPs with ward-level ICPs. This vertical integration offers an excellent opportunity for farmers to showcase their innovations while promoting communication and information sharing between smallholders and other stakeholder groups at a higher institutional level. Ward level ICPs can effectively contribute to EU-DREAM broad objectives through periodic feedback and information sharing with TFCA platform members during annual workshops. Demand-driven innovation platforms at ward level can create opportunities for farmers to implement action plans that will be meaningfully shared and showcased at intermediary and national levels. This can enhance the scaling up of best practices. Multi-layering of ICPs has shown great potential to solve farmer challenges, improve sustainability and influence national policies (Dror et al., 2016; Schut et al., 2019).

In addition, serious considerations have to be made in terms of whether to establish ICPs on existing forms of farmer organisation (Dabire et al., 2017) or to completely build them from scratch. For instance, farmer groups are already in existence in all the study sites and these can constitute the core members of an ICP. Therefore, conducting a participatory diagnosis is important as it provides essential information on existing farmer groups and the activities they are implementing as well as the challenges and opportunities that exist for collective action. The process also profiles the different actors working with farmers both at district and ward levels and the type of services they are offering to farmers (van der Schans and Lemperiere, 2006a; Schut et al., 2015). In this study, the fact that most organisations and farmers are linked to each other already through government departments like AGRITEX and Veterinary Services means that they can have easy access to the same information through central actors. Identifying key stakeholders is of particular importance during ICP establishment and the subsequent implementation of activities. It also indicates that farmer groups are likely to retain support from these government departments; provided that the platform pursues activities of mutual interest. In the long term, this institutional alignment will heavily contribute to both the viability and sustainability of the ICPs.

Furthermore, the active participation of government extension agencies such as AGRITEX and the Veterinary Services Department in ICPs is a key advantage, given their long-standing community presence, institutional legitimacy, and statutory authority, which contrast with the often transient, project-dependent involvement of NGOs (Mitchell, Agle and Wood, 1997; Klerkx and Begemann, 2020). Literature shows that although all stakeholders are important, their relevance is determined or undermined by a number of factors. Endogenous organisations are more trusted to work with communities and farmers compared to exogenous ones (Dentoni et al, 2021). Government institutions continue to exist by offering services in communities unlike NGOs that can pull-out if funding is exhausted. Building on the foundational stakeholder salience framework established by Mitchell, Agle and Wood (1997), government extension agencies such as AGRITEX and the Veterinary Services Department are often classified as definitive stakeholders within ICPs. They seamlessly combine institutional power through statutory authority, high legitimacy via state-backed mandate and community trust, as well as situational urgency by responding to regulatory or crisis-driven demands. This robust profile contrasts with that of NGOs, which may possess

legitimacy and urgency but often lack the structural power and permanent presence, making them less central to long-term ICP governance and decision-making.

Remarkably, despite the strong presence of these state actors, the empirical results reveal weak ties between different organisations and farmer groups. The findings also highlight uncoordinated and fragmented approaches to service delivery across all farmer groups at the ward level. For example, the study documented numerous instances in which different organisations supported the same farmer or farmer group at different times. This operational duplication resulted in double-dipping and resource-use inefficiency. Furthermore, interlinkages among the farmer groups themselves remain weak, despite these groups implementing almost identical activities and receiving support from the same external organisations. Finally, it remains unclear whether ICPs created using the PDP framework will remain functional in the long run. However, empirical evidence from this study demonstrates that stakeholders in agriculture and wildlife conservation can collaboratively identify systemic problems, co-design targeted solutions, and jointly plan, and implement platform activities. As demonstrated throughout this paper, involving all ICP members in these iterative processes from the onset, rather than mid-cycle, is essential for fostering long-term institutional ownership and platform resilience (Schut et al., 2024; Gobvu et al., 2025; Triomphe et al., 2025).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Participatory diagnosis, combined with validation and planning workshops offer great potential for ICP establishment. The presence of multiple and diverse organisations and farmer groups working collectively is evidence of collective action towards addressing agricultural and NRM challenges. However, evidence indicates that many of these organisations operate in isolation. This isolation underscores the urgent need to integrate their efforts into a holistic approach, thereby minimising the risk of service duplication and resource inefficiency. Interestingly, the findings present an oxymoron: private sector engagement with farmers is minimal at the ward level, despite evidence of limited markets for their abundant produce. This disconnect results in weak or non-existent linkages between grassroots producers and commercial actors. Conversely, the validation and planning processes demonstrated a strong willingness among all potential stakeholders to implement the activities that are necessary for establishing functional, ward-level ICPs. Every stakeholder possesses a distinct role that directly supports the execution of the platform's work plans. Consequently, there are promising prospects that collaborative actions among government agencies, the private sector, researchers, NGOs/CBOs, and traditional leaders will foster synergy building, alongside robust knowledge and resource sharing. These collaborative dynamics offer critical opportunities for setting up demand-driven ICPs within Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TFCAs). The empirical results underscore the structural importance of conducting sequential participatory diagnosis and planning sessions during ICP inception. This framework demands successive iterations with various stakeholders across multiple institutional levels. While the PD stage generates baseline knowledge regarding organisational density, local challenges, and latent opportunities; the subsequent validation and planning sessions corroborate these diagnostic findings. This collaborative evaluation sharpens strategic discussions toward designing highly localised, ward level solutions. Ultimately, this approach grants smallholders the necessary operational space to pioneer and implement innovations, ensuring that the nascent ICPs are genuinely demand-driven.

In conclusion, immense potential exists for establishing viable and functional ICPs within TFCAs by leveraging existing formal and informal organisational structures at the ward level. Furthermore, while farmers already practice localised forms of collective action, formalising these initiatives through structured multi-stakeholder collaboration could significantly enhance socio-economic and conservation outcomes. Nevertheless, determining which actors should populate an ICP remains a complex task that requires a comprehensive, well-structured theoretical and operational framework. A granular understanding of the localised contextual environment, alongside a clear mapping of the key stakeholders supporting agriculture and NRM initiatives at different institutional levels, is paramount to long-term platform sustainability.

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