



Global Discourse, 29 September 2015, 6 pm

Event summary: Can Grassroots Innovation bring Global Solutions?

Ann Waters-Bayer, ProInnova/KIT, Netherlands and **Lemlem Sissay Fetene**, International consultant, Vienna discussed on the podium. **Birgit Habermann** from BOKU-CDR, led through the evening and 20 interested participants followed the discourse.

What is the definition of grassroots innovation? This was the opening question of the discourse, as various understandings exist. Innovation is often simply understood as the implementation of new technologies. According to Ann Waters-Bayer, grassroots innovation, however, is different: it results from local processes that are based on interactions and knowledge exchange among people about locally new, creative and better ways in doing things. Seeking knowledge, seeking more interactions with others and experimenting more – these are key activities showing that people are engaged in innovation.

Many examples of grassroots innovation exist. Lemlem Sissay Fetene describes her experience in Ethiopia and how knowledge exchange about medicinal plants links the traditional rural community – where the plants are gathered, with the modern, urban community – where the plants are used for treatments. Ann Waters-Bayer gives an example of the mutual learning she observed among beekeepers from different countries during a farmer innovation fair in Kenya. But despite this abundance of knowledge and ideas at farmers' level, it seems that formal researchers only admire farmers' creativity, but do not respond to enhance and support it. Why not? – asks Birgit Habermann. Among the main reasons mentioned for this apparent contradiction were the disconnect between formal research organizations and small-scale farmers as well as the funding mechanisms for research, in which the farmers have little say.

Ann Waters-Bayer points out that the concept of innovation is understood differently in most research organizations, where the common belief is that innovation means that farmers are adopting the technologies that the researchers have developed. This explains why researchers do not see innovation when it happens at the farmer's level. Lemlem Sissay Fetene's concern is that the global research agenda follows different interests and



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Habermann, Waters-Bayer
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Sissay Fetene, Habermann, Waters-Bayer
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overlooks the resources at local level. She gives the example of “teff”, an important staple foods in Ethiopia. It was only when teff was discovered to be a “healthy food” of global interest that some research funding was dedicated to it.

Despite all the challenges, grassroots innovation has potential. Each innovation by farmers is a small step towards improved rural livelihoods. The process of recognition and the interaction among the various actors are key. Recognition by outsiders for farmer researchers and farmers recognizing themselves as researchers can be transformative, so Ann Waters-Bayer.

What is required to put grassroots innovation on the global agenda? Decentralized research all over the world and support for farmers innovating in their specific circumstances is required instead of uniform approaches. The one-size-fits-all approach will not work, agreed Lemlem Sissay Fetene and Ann Waters-Bayer. (© CDR/ BS/BH)



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