

## New insights into promoting pro-poor rural innovation: Lessons from civil society

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### **Abstract**

This paper is based on a study that explored pro-poor rural innovation processes associated with civil society activity in India and Uganda. It tested two propositions. The first of these is that there are lessons to be gained from civil society organizations about how pro-poor innovation can be enabled. The second proposition was that a useful way of generating lessons was to explore civil society activities with the help of the innovation systems conceptual framework. To explore these issues in greater depth, case studies were undertaken on the following sectors, namely, systems of rice intensification (SRI); pineapple processing in Orissa by tribal communities; marketing of medicinal plants; development and promotion of renewable energy-based agro-processing driers; rural household lighting systems; integrated support of artisan fisheries; non-pesticide management approaches; the use of traditional healers in HIV/AIDS care; and upgrading rural weaving enterprises.

The paper discusses the major features of each of these cases and presents the findings and policy implications that emerged from this study. Civil society organizations play two important roles. Firstly, as a space for trying out new ideas and ways of working that would often not be permissible in main stream research and development organizations and secondly, as a mechanism for facilitating links to technical and other expertise and to policy. Innovation is abundant in civil society activities and often involves a set of interrelated changes – technology, ways of working, policy and ways of organizing production and marketing. Within civil society space individuals often play pivotal roles either in championing an innovation or an alternative innovation process, or as a “connector” who has no involvement in the alternative innovation process but want others to find out about it. While it seems rhetorical to say that civil society organizations introduce strong pro-poor agenda, it is very often true.

Two modes of pro-poor action were observed. The first being the development of pro-poor business models through cluster of technical, organizational and institutional innovations and subsequent efforts to bring these to scale – for example agro-processing or weaving enterprises. The second was an integrated sector support approach, helping poor people cope with changing contexts in their sectors – for example artisanal fisheries. The more successful modes of support involved long term interventions – 10 years and more -- where the approach and focus of support was able to evolve and develop organically, often in response to the changing needs of the pro-poor sector or the pro-poor enterprise. For example technical change may be more important at certain times, but subsequently policy or marketing issues maybe become the priority. A learning based approach was part of the capacity of civil society organization that worked in this way.

There are two common constraints to pro-poor innovation. Firstly, the difficulty of developing productive interactions with research organizations and with the policy-making processes. Second constraint is the lack of bank lending mechanisms for taking pro-poor business innovations to scale.

The paper recommends identifying promising civil society activities that are promoting pro-poor innovation and argues for public funding to such initiatives, as this would provide more choice in approaches, bring legitimacy to promising alternatives and act as source of learning to inform interventions design. The paper also calls for the creation of a new public policy and intervention space to address the theme of rural innovation in a truly integrated and holistic fashion. Its focus should be on both building new patterns of interaction and creating the incentives to allow alternate approaches and ways of working to emerge that strengthen pro-poor innovation capacity.