Seed Systems and Crop Management Community of Practice: Are Learning Journeys Useful?

Peer-to-peer technical engagement has been increased through conducting eight learning journeys as part of the seed system community of practice. The learning journeys provide opportunities for informal knowledge sharing, networking and cementing the bonds between members.

What is the problem?
The purpose of the Sweetpotato Seed Systems and Crop Management Community of Practice (SSCM-CoP) is to facilitate networking, exchange of experiences and learning to generate new knowledge about how to tackle crucial constraints in sweetpotato seed systems and crop management across Sub-Saharan Africa. The challenge is to apply approaches that accommodate the diverse learning preferences and styles that exist in the group. As adults, we learn in different ways, so we have been trying different approaches to encourage interactions and exchange of ideas and research for development practitioners. In particular, we have been utilizing the “learning journey” approach to promote experiential, practice-oriented learning between travelers and hosts, both having mutually useful experiences and knowledge. For more information on learning routes, visit http://www.africa.procasur.org.

How are we making it happen?
One approach which we have used is a “learning journey” which is adapted from a “Learning Route” which is a planned journey with learning objectives that are designed based on (i) the knowledge needs of development practitioners that are faced with problems associated with rural poverty and, (ii) the identification of relevant experiences in which local stakeholders have tackled similar challenges in innovative ways, with successful results and accumulated knowledge which is potentially useful to others. The routes allow for the experiential encounter between travelers and hosts, both having mutually useful experiences and knowledge. For more information on learning routes, visit www.africa.procasur.org.

This approach has been used during three face-to-face meetings of the CoP (Fig. 1), in Kigali (April 2015), Nairobi (December 2015) and Arusha (May 2016). The location of the meeting influences the type of learning journey, and vice versa – what we would like to learn influences the choice of meeting location. Before the site visits, participants are required to engage in online learning routes, visit www.africa.procasur.org.

What do we want to achieve?
We aim to strengthen the technical, financial and institutional capacities of NARIs, and to ensure that they can cost in effective and sustainable sweetpotato seed enterprises. We want to encourage interaction and exchange of ideas so that we can strengthen our research and development interventions. Peer-to-peer learning is fundamental in identifying common constraints and working towards solutions. We also want to avoid new members having repeat mistakes made in the past.

Where and with whom are we working?
We are working in 11 countries (Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia), with the NARIs research and extension services, NGOs, and private tissue culture laboratories.

Learning Journey Theme The Learning Objective

Kigali: April 2015
Route 1: To understand KEPHIS’ role as regional center of excellence for sweetpotato germplasm management and exchange, and how to ensure pre-basic seed production practices.
Route 2: To find out the strategies being used in order to meet the demand.
Route 3: To understand the business model for quality root production: sources of vines for growers; owners pricing, field establishment and management of vines for profit, post-mixtural quality management during shipping, profit sharing.
Route 4: To carry out inspection of sweetpotato QDS and explore ways of institutionalizing it.
Route 5: To identify good practices for tissue culture micro-propagation and screen house production of pre-basic seed.
Route 6: To complete a multipliers report on the following preparations: (a) highlights, key learning points and new or more in-depth research questions that could be pursued in light of the visit – either by the host of the visit or in participants’ own institutions; and present to the CoP members in plenary; (b) nominate a topic and lead person for continued online (Google Group) discussion.

Nairobi: December 2015
Route 1: To understand EPFUR’s role in a regional center of excellence for sweetpotato germplasm management and exchange, and how to ensure pre-basic seed production practices.
Route 2: To understand the importance of improved sweetpotato seed systems might establish their own CoP.

Arusha: May 2016
Route 1: To understand the business model for quality root production: sources of vines for growers; owners pricing, field establishment and management of vines for profit, post-mixtural quality management during shipping, profit sharing.
Route 2: To identify good practices for tissue culture micro-propagation and screen house production of pre-basic seed.
Route 3: To find out the strategies being used in order to meet the demand.
Route 4: To understand the business model for quality root production: sources of vines for growers; owners pricing, field establishment and management of vines for profit, post-mixtural quality management during shipping, profit sharing.
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What are the next steps?
We have anecdotal feedback that CoP members enjoy the learning journeys and take back ideas to try in their own countries. However, we would like to carry out a more systematic assessment of whether the learning journeys stimulate new research topics and affect change in seed systems technologies and practices. The CGIAR Research Program on Roots, Tubers and Bananas (RTB) cross-cutting seed systems cluster has commissioned a study to document how the different components of our community of practice function, so that colleagues from other RTB crop seed systems might establish their own CoP.