Partnering with the Private Sector to Reach Smallholder Farmers

Question and Answer Audio Transcript

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Presenters

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Julie: Excellent. Thank you so much to our presenters for this really rich and interesting presentation, and thank you to all of you who have been continually putting some questions and comments in the chat box. We've been really pleased with all of the engagement in the chat box during this webinar. It's really exciting.

Julie: And now we have, actually, up to half an hour to continue discussing and answering some of your questions. And so we've been collecting all of those in a separate window on the right hand side of our screens, and we'll get through as many as we can.

Julie: Let's see. Alright, I'm going to jump down to a question that came in from [Ifzika 00:00:43] [Mustafa 00:00:44], who noted that this is all very impressive, but noting also that this is primarily a supply side intervention. "What about integrating the demand side, demand for small holder farmers, and their organizations?"

Rana: So-

Laura: Sure, go ahead, Rana.

Rana: Hi, so this is Rana. I just wanted to emphasize that it's not really a supply side intervention.

Laura: Right.

Rana: Because, essentially, what this is about is that private sector companies are proposing solutions that they will then take on, and they only get paid if they do so. And the farmers are the ones who make the purchases, or make the commitments. And it doesn't work, if there is no demand. Like there's nothing that's being pushed down, everything is demand driven. And a lot of the indicators are sales-based. So it doesn't really get more demand size than that.

Rana: And there were a lot of questions kind of asking about, "How do you sort of choose where to focus?" And I'm going to be honest, a lot of this is kind of dependent on the development objective. That emission, or an operating unit, or sort of [inaudible 00:02:07] is looking to advance. Like, people who have been following this for some time, know that there were some resilience space partnerships that were, there were some that were purely technology commercialization, there were different buckets. So that's why it's a little bit varied.

Rana: And I saw Judy's question about an evaluation. So this is still going to go up to March, 2021, so we still have some time to think about a rigorous evaluation. But it is quite challenging because different types of partnerships are meant to achieve different

development objectives, which is why, sometimes, I can see if people are looking at it holistically, I understand why some of the questions are being asked, but different sets of partnerships are meant to advance different development objectives, and solve for different problems.

Rana: But what we're trying to do with this report is to look at the approach, like, whatever you're trying to achieve, how do you look at the impact when you're partnering with the private sector? And this study is trying to test this new approach to measuring that impact, and looking at that sustainability.

Laura: Yeah, I think those are all great points, Rana, yeah. Something we, you know, often struggle with is we're talking about apples, and oranges, and bananas, and pineapple. We're talking about every kind of fruit, but we're trying to talk about them in one way, and that's, you know, just fundamentally difficult. So, you know, we talk about technologies and service provision, but there is a lot more than that. Some of our partners have been working to pull small holder farmers into market by providing, you know, market linkage support, and aggregation services. So there are a lot of different models that we kind of implemented under Partnering for Innovation.

Laura: I think what that reflects is how flexible the fundamental program model, Partnering for Innovation, is itself. As Rana mentioned, we've looked at a lot of different ways to target private sector partners, these kind of larger technology commercialization calls, and then individual country specific calls. And the great thing about the Partnering for Innovation model is you can kind of tweak it to work in any scenario. So you identify what the constraint is that you want to work on, and then you ask private sector partners to propose solutions to that constraint. So it works. We found it worked very well in lots of different situations, and to achieve different types of development outcomes.

Julie: Great. Thank you. And I just wanted to note for those of you who have been asking in the chat box, and remind you all, that the presentation is being recorded, and by virtue of attending today, you will get an email with the recording and the slides, a few other additional resources, including the chat box transcripts, so that you can keep an eye on all the incredible questions that have been coming through. And some of those resources may also be posted on the AGRILINKS event page for this webinar sooner than that email comes out. So if there's anything you are looking for, specifically, please do check there. But you can also download the presentation right now on the bottom left of your screen.

Julie: All right. Let's see. Another question that came in ... Let's see. From Peter Boone at Palladium, "How many of the partnerships were just focused on new business models, but they're not really focused on any specific new technology?"

Emily: I would say, of the companies that we interviewed, I can't say for the partnership as a whole, but I think of the ones that we talked to, I think it was about a third. It was, actually, I think, interestingly, maybe about a third that had a completely new technology, a third that somehow adapted an existing technology, and then a third that just developed a new business model to reach small holder farmers. So, I think it was really interesting to us that there was no real difference across these different groups in terms of the success that they were able to have in terms of expansion and profitability within the small holder sector. And so I think it's a testament to the model. It's able to adapt to help develop business models and commercialize technologies, depending on, or regardless of, of what stage they're in.

Julie: Thank you, Emily. And you used the word 'technology' frequently, but I thought it was interesting that Lorraine at Inga Foundation asked, "Were there any goods or services sold, or provided, in this study that did not require technology per se, such as in a remote area?"

Emily: Yeah, I mean, again, we use the word 'technology' just as kind of a catch-all for any kind of same service item delivered to small holder farmers. But it wasn't always even a tangible product in every case, you know, we're working with a partner ...

Emily: So this report looked at our first kind of tranche of partners, we had 50 partners through the first six years, we have nine new partners right now. And one of our new partners is just working on supply chain logistics. So, you know, there's no technology, tangible technology being handed over to small holder farmers. They're working on aggregation and [inaudible 00:07:34] in rural areas, which we consider a technology in and of itself.

Emily: The word technology is really a catch-all for different products and services that can be provided to small holder farmers.

Rana: Yeah. I'm going to chime in, where I think a helpful way to think about it is products and services that are not currently available to small holder farmers, or that they can't access or can't afford.

Rana: So it's making those products and services accessible. It could be a new logistics route.

Emily: Right.

Rana: Or it could be a new seed variety, or it could be ... Many things. So technology is an all encompassing [inaudible 00:08:07].

Julie: Yup. I think that's a useful explanation for the audience.

Laura: And in the links on the left hand side, there is a video overview of Partnering for Innovation that kind of goes into depth on three of our partners. So if you're interested in learning more about the types of partners we worked with, I think that's an interesting look at that. So I'd encourage you to check that out.

Julie: Great. Thank you. All right, moving back to our questions. Let's see. See, I also thought this one from Judy Payne was interesting, and you may have partially addressed it, but, "How are these findings changing how Partnering for Innovation selects new partners going forward, such as making sure they have a business plan ready or technology ready?"

Laura: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Julie: Et cetera.

Laura: Yeah. So, as I mentioned, we have kind of this new group of partners that all started at the beginning of 2019, so, unfortunately, we kind of missed this report a little bit, but a lot ... I think I'll, you know, they'll work out a lot of things that we're going to learn from, and kind of integrate into the program. But a lot of this is stuff we have learned, as well, over all the years of implementation. So, actually, business model is one of the things we evaluate applicants against now, because it's something we learned. As you know, success isn't really tied to a technology, you know, a technology can be a good idea, but implementation of that technology can still be a failure if there's not a business plan behind it. So that's something we kind of rigorously evaluate and vet now, is making sure that, you know, there's not just a cool idea about a technology or service to be provided to small holder farmers.

Laura: There's also a way to commercially implement that. We want to make sure that it's feasible, that it's going to make the partner money, because it's not sustainable, if it doesn't make them money. So that's something we've already incorporated into our evaluation criteria.

Laura: So all of our nine new partners were evaluated against that. And, actually, some of their initial deliverables to us were business plans. And at the end of the partnership they'll be asked to submit an updated business plan that includes how they're going to continue in scale, whether that be external investment, or internal investment, whatever they want that to look like.

Laura: So I think some of that has been incorporated into here. I think the point about making business development services, acceleration services, more company specific is also something we've taken to heart, and something that's incorporated into the new partnerships, as well.

Julie: Great. Thank you.

Julie: Let's see. All right. An interesting question that's just came in recently by [Fatu 00:10:56] [Kiney 00:10:56], "Data collection is a real problem and challenge. Can you share some of your experiences about the data collection throughout this study, and perhaps what challenges you ran into, or what you used for data collection?"

Emily: Just to clarify, is this a question about data collection during the partnership, or the way that we collected the data in the report?

Julie: That is a good question. Fatu, if you are still online, please feel free to clarify that piece of your question, but perhaps if there's just an interesting [inaudible 00:11:32] that you'd like to share.

Emily: Yeah. I guess I can speak to our methodology around collecting data for the report, and then, Laura, if you want to add around how you work with companies. As Jeff mentioned at the beginning, we did in-depth interviews with all of the companies to gather findings for this report. I think we ran into one of the same challenges that Laura highlighted earlier, which is just the fact that the companies are all at different stages. They're working in different markets, they're developing different products and services that aren't necessarily directly comparable to each other. And so I think, in terms of synthesizing the findings, that is a challenge to understand how you can come up with a set of findings that speaks to the experiences of all these very, very different companies.

Emily: I think, also, not all of the companies had sales data readily available that they were able to share. And so that piece, we weren't able to rigorously, or kind of quantitatively, evaluate to the degree that we might have liked.

Laura: Yeah, I mean, I think that reflects our experience as well. And that's why I mentioned this earlier. You know, the way we approach data collection with our partners is to try to create a system that works for them. So either using their existing systems in terms of verifying the milestones that they're sending into us, whether that be sales data, or service provision, or anything like that. We want to look at the way they measure that themselves. If they don't have robust enough systems to measure that in a way that, you know, they should probably have as a growing business, or that satisfies our reporting requirements, we work with them to build their capacity to implement those systems.

Laura: So we're actually working with a partner in Nigeria right now, who have a fee-for-service model, but no way to track his customer base. So that's something we're helping him build out, and then we're going to use the system that we're helping him build to track

his sales. So I think that's an example of how we've kind of approached the data collection issue, is kind of as a capacity building exercise.

Julie: Great, thank you. A question, though, that frequently comes in, and one that several of our attendees were hoping that you all could address is to ask whether gender was at all a focus of this project, and if so, how it was incorporated.

Julie: Kind of noting that in many USA proposals, artists are expected to include some sort of women's empowerment study, or the like.

Laura: Yeah, I mean, just because [inaudible 00:14:26] is in the room, I'd love to see a call specifically targeting women about technologies that maybe specifically target women. So I'll lob that out there if anybody is looking to throw some funding our way, that would be really interesting. I think we do, when we're looking at the milestone data, so, usually, you know, sales data, we do just aggregate that by gender wherever possible.

Laura: It's not always possible for our partners, so we do encourage that.

Laura: Something else we did recently, and we're about to launch a second one, so this is a chance to plug that, is we did a prize based award last year called Accelerating Women Entrepreneurs, where we specifically targeted female entrepreneurs working in agribusiness who needed capacity building support, to kind of scale, or commercialize, their technologies. So that was kind of a different model, because we weren't providing investment support. We weren't giving them cash. We were just providing the capacity building support. We're about to launch a second round of that. It should be coming out soon, so please, if you're interested in that, or know female entrepreneurs who might be interested in that, please watch our website for that one.

Laura: So that is a way we've specifically targeted female-run agribusinesses. It was really successful in the first round. There's actually a great video about that one too. Maybe we can send around with the webinar when it's finalized.

Laura: But yeah, other than the Accelerating Women Entrepreneurs, where we targeted female agribusiness owners, there hasn't been kind of a specific activity focusing on women. A lot of our work inherently affects women, and we just aggregate that, and track that, to the extent that we can.

Rana: Yeah, no, this is ... Because I feel like this is separate from the usual value-chain holistic activity.

Laura: Right.

Rana: This is using a different approach that's kind of market based, and private sector driven, to attend to some of these problems.

Laura: Right.

Rana: And a lot of the problem of the moment is kind of determined by the funding entity. So like Laura said, we haven't had a big gender based partnership call yet. But the Women Entrepreneurs video is amazing, and I will make sure you all get it. It is like exactly the type of thing you want to see come out of [inaudible 00:16:47]

Laura: I do think there were some partnerships that impacted women more than others, because they provided a technology, or service, where women, you know, are the majority participants. A good example of that is in Zambia we have a program to set up seedling nurseries, and commercialize that. So creating these kind of entrepreneurs who grow, and then sell, these improved seedlings, and the majority of those entrepreneurs are women. So I think there are some examples like that. But yeah, as Rana mentioned, there hasn't been kind of a specific focus on that, because that's not what the missions have asked for yet.

Julie: I'd like to take this opportunity to pull up our closing poll, since I'm sure a few of you might need to depart somewhat soon, even though we do have about 10 more minutes for questions. So please do let us know if you can apply what you learned to your work, how this webinar has helped improve your knowledge, and, of course, we are always open to suggestions for improving future webinars, so please do let us know if there's something that could have been better today, or that you would suggest as a topic, or a method for a future webinar.

Julie: I'll also post my email address in the chat box if anyone does want to reach out to me about the AGRILINKS webinar series as a whole. And, again, this is Julie McCarty speaking.

Julie: I thought it would also be a nice chance to toss it over to Jeff to see if there's anything he'd like to weigh in on from the discussion that we've had so far.

Julie: We also had a few questions come in about different things about measurements that I think you might like to chime in on to clarify. And so, thought we'd toss it over to you, Jeff, for a few comments.

Jeff: Excellent. Thanks, Julie. Yeah, no, this was a great discussion, and thanks so much for all the really rich questions that have been asked. I think it's an important reminder, also, when we ask some of the questions about how aspects might have been measured, or, you know, other pieces that could be brought in in terms of data. I think what we really

saw this study, as a report, as it is, again, a starting point, as I mentioned at the beginning, I think there's a lot of insights that can be generated from the conversations that we had, but, certainly, as Rana alluded to, and others, that, you know, once the study, or the actual program, is concluded, doing perhaps a more rigorous evaluation across the board might be able to dive in a little bit deeper into some of the impact, you know, at the kind of small holder level, and whatnot.

Jeff: So I think a lot of these, you know, we were really pushing as much as we could in the nature of the conversation, and the data that we had. But again, this is, I think, you know, a strong starting point, and a fairly consistent set of themes that did emerge. But, certainly, the things that can be tested and taken forward, as well.

Jeff: So that was just one thought and reflection. You know, the other I'd say is that, and, you know, we saw a couple of points on this too about, "What are the things that could be improved?" And I think Emily did allude to this. What I would say is that we were, you know, we pushed pretty hard in those conversations with partners to really get a sense of, you know, not just, "Was this an okay program, did it help?" Like, "What were the things that were challenging, and could have been improved?" And we found, as you know, as Emily mentioned before, part of the aspects around, you know, some of the tailoring around the capacity building. But that was really around the margins. And a few other points here and there that are also outlined in the report, but, largely, we were even, you know, surprised, because working in this space for a long time, you generally see a lot of really strong opinions in both directions. But this was a pretty roundly supported program, and allotted program, by the folks that we spoke with.

Jeff: So it's not for a lack of pushing on those topics. It really was a core focus, and I think there are some important lessons, things that can be refined and improved on. But I would just underscore how positive the perceptions were across the board with these companies.

Julie: Wonderful. Thank you so much, Jeff.

Julie: Alright. I think we've gotten through a ton of questions. This has been a really dense webinar, and we've been so thrilled with the participation from our attendees. And so I think that we're going to wrap up, but as mentioned before, you'll get the recording, and the post-event resources in an email. We'll also share any unanswered questions with the presenters as to see if there might be a followup blog post, or the like, that can help them ensure that you have all the information you need.

Julie: But I'd like to toss it over to Laura for a few final comments.

Laura: Yeah, thanks so much. So we've noticed a lot of questions about how Partnering for Innovations model is operationalized and implemented, kind of very specific questions about if you were interested in this model, how you would launch that, and what that would look like. So I just want to refer everyone to our website, which, again, there's a link on the left hand side. We have a extremely detailed overview of our approach, and our tools and resources there, including a robust guide on how you go about soliciting and implementing partnerships with the private sector. So if that is something you want to learn more about, I'd really encourage you to visit that. I think it will probably answer almost every single question you have, it's extremely detailed, and well done.

Laura: And, you know, we have our contact information on the website as well. So if you have any questions that weren't answered during this webinar, and aren't answered on the website, we'd be happy. We love talking about our implementation, and results, and impact. So if you have questions that aren't answered here, or on the website, we're happy to answer those.

Julie: Excellent. All right, I think I'm going to go ahead and close things up. Thank you so much to the AGRILINKS team for helping manage this webinar, and put it on, and we hope to see you at future events. Thank you all.