

‘Let local innovators participate in the mainstream!’

Johanna Dekker

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African small and medium enterprises (SMEs) prove to be resilient under conditions of scarcity or volatility. Therefore, their inclusion in the co-creation of transformative sustainability pathways has to improve, according to this panel.

‘Africa does know, and there are very interesting lessons to draw,’ said Sietze Vellema of 2SCALE, an incubator for inclusive agribusiness in Africa. Vellema’s guiding question was how to insert the capacities of local innovators into the mainstream. 2SCALE tries to help its partners achieve this. An example is 2SCALE’s support for Shalem in Kenya. This social enterprise sources sorghum from smallholder farmers. It manages to navigate scarcity and volatility in a resource-constrained context while providing access to affordable and nutritious food. 2SCALE helps them activate their target group, people who live on less than 2 dollars a day.

Peter Knorringa of the Centre for Frugal Innovation in Africa advocated a bottom-up per-

spective and focusing on opportunities instead of problems. The role of agencies is central, he said, and inclusion of SMEs would serve to enrich policy. His colleague Elsie Onsongo pleaded for the inclusion of communities and their knowledge in the innovation process. Increasing connectivity between local practices and knowledge systems can shorten the innovation cycle. Abel Ezeoha from Nigeria Ebonyi State University pointed out that engagement models developed by multinationals such as Heineken and FrieslandCampina did not work as they were based on corporate responsibility and did little to support the development of frugal innovation in African sectors.

Multi-stakeholder platforms help to engage the state and embed innovations in local contexts, said Million Gebreyes of Bonn University. Policy and policymakers should become more responsive to dialogue. Joel Onyango of the African Centre for Technology Studies in Nairobi approached the issue from a different perspective, namely how to engage policymakers as researchers. He advocated moving from dialogue to co-production, as dialogue spaces are elitist, with always the same people participating. Informalising information would create opportunities for decolonising research. Co-production exercises for development would create inclusive spaces and promote the ownership of solutions, which means that projects will continue despite the government pulling out at the end of an intervention. The question remained how to rethink the current infrastructure. André Leliveld of the Centre for Frugal Innovation in Africa put it succinctly: ‘Let people sit at the table, not just the solution!’

Take-aways

- Improve the inclusion of African SMEs in the creation of transformative sustainability pathways
- Connect local knowledge to mainstream knowledge
- Make institutional structures more responsive to all stakeholders