

# Facilitating innovations

Many innovations involve changes which transcend the individual business or are only achievable when various businesses and/or interested parties take up the challenge together. In System Innovation Programmes, the necessary innovations are facilitated by means of workshops related to specific areas and by forming socio-technical networks.

## >> Region-based workshops

Some businesses are not able to innovate on their own. The situation in an individual business, the physical environment, the power sphere of interested parties or restrictive laws and regulations do not always allow for this. Innovations often involve changes that transcend the individual business and are only achievable if various businesses and interested parties work together to achieve the necessary changes. The question is, how do you organise things to ensure that the parties find common ground in new ideas and projects?

The System Innovation Programmes have acquired the necessary experience in workshops related to regional issues in diverse regions and with diverse issues (Veerse Meer, Maashorst, marsh-meadow areas, Overijsselse Vecht). These workshops have proved to be an excellent instrument in order to bring together entrepreneurs and other interested parties in the region to come up with innovative ideas and projects. The way the workshop is set up is very important. Sometimes fruitful collaboration seems impossible because the short term interests of various regional parties are diametrically opposed. If the starting point is a region specific problem

## The Regional Farm

In the Regional Farm concept, six themes for regional collaboration have been expanded upon where entrepreneurs can extract added-value. Agricultural businesses collaborate intensively or merge together.

The entrepreneurs manage machinery in collaboration so that they can be utilized more efficiently. They also divide the tasks, which leads to specialization and a more efficient business operation. The time that the entrepreneurs gain can be used to broaden their activities. Farmers combine their individual conservation plans into a single local conservation plan and manage it as a group. At regional level the wooded ridges, banks, old creek beds and natural ditches form a coherent whole.

Maashorst Energie is a cooperative venture formed around one or more biomass fermenta-

tation installations. There is enough raw material in the Maashorst to generate a total capacity of 15 to 20 megawatt. The manure surplus, some 28,000 truckloads, together with corn, grass or crop remains are turned into electricity and heat by mixed-fermentation.

Regional supermarket branches are developing their own brand together with the Maashorst farmers. With new – regional – products, the producers and retailers earn more. The supermarkets also radiate the luxury and quality image of the region. The Maashorst also attracts new target groups with luxury accommodation. Think of double income earners who are happy to pay for authenticity, luxury, privacy, wellness and comfort. Agrarian buildings are converted into accommodation “Maashorst” style and package deals are developed.





Stakeholders debating the issue of nutrient leaching on sandy soils in the Netherlands. They stand in a landscape between profit (foreground), planet (background), technology (right) and regulations (left). The body language clearly shows that the stakeholders in grid 5 and 7 on the left have their doubts about the opinions of the farmer in grid 9 on the right. The opinions and the body language of the players can be used to form coalitions and/or to divide tasks around the subject of innovation. More information can be found in Buurma et al., 2006.

and/or a future vision, then this results in shared visions and interests. From that point, you can move towards innovative ideas which can be addressed in project form. It is essential to tap into the innovative power, positive interest and energy of the parties involved. A good example of this is the Regional Farm concept, an umbrella term for all sorts of different cooperative activities in the Maashorst, an area in the province of Brabant of about 4000 hectares (see box).

### >> Socio-technical networks

It often appears that various parties (entrepreneurs, supply and production chains, public interest groups) already have ideas for innovations in a common domain, aspect of a chain or farm management. The problem is that they are not able to find each other – literally and figuratively – or that they meet up with obstacles that they can't surmount on their own.

A socio-technical network unites the diverse parties around this sort of common issue. The name refers back to the two main factors involved in this sort of network. It is not only a question of the technical aspects of innovation, but also changes in the way people collaborate and in the institutional environment.

### >> Visions

Initiating the network begins with an extensive round of interviews with the various parties. These interviews are summarized in an innovation landscape: an overview of the concerns and mindsets of the different parties. This system reveals both the central problem or challenge and the search direction for the short term (operation-

al) or long term (strategic). In this way, it becomes clear where the common ground is and where their visions diverge from one another. These visions are discussed and where possible, coalitions are made around shared directions for solutions. This is the basis for forming projects. In this way completely new initiatives and close-knit networks grow around a common challenge. It is precisely because the parties are appealed to on the basis of what they themselves find important, that there is a good chance that this sort of network will work with a united front.

### >> Surprising results

System Innovation Programmes have acquired a great deal of experience with socio-technical networks. This organisational form has led to future-oriented sustainable initiatives and surprising results. Where research and policy have been inclined to look for solutions within their own field of expertise, socio-technical networks often search for avenues for a solution in a different way. One such surprising result is found in the project *Mobysant* (mobile cultivation system for chrysanthemums) for the chrysanthemum network. This was initiated to deal with the issue of pest control. The sustainable solution was found via an innovative mobile cultivation system that also deals with other operational dilemmas. The forming of a chain for the supermarket channel in the gerbera sector is a good example of a result when market and chain parties discover one another within a network.

Socio-technical networks are also used as a tool in innovation projects to ensure that a broad collaboration born of shared interest actually works on innovations and on surmounting obstacles.

For more information: Jan Buurma (socio-technical networks), t +31 70 3358303, e jan.buurma@wur.nl

Andries Visser (region-oriented workshops), t +31 320 291347, e andries.visser@wur.nl

Gerard Migchels (region-oriented workshops), t +31 320 293461, e gerard.migchels@wur.nl