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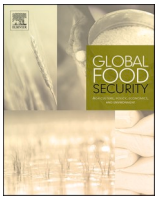

Guiding sector transformation: Power strategies of a non-state actor in the centrally planned seed sector of Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

After years of political turmoil and the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed as prime minister in 2018, the 'developmental state' as a model for economic growth and development was jettisoned – at least discursively – and the government set a reform agenda focused on democratisation and liberalisation. However, central planning is still deeply rooted in the seed sector and seed plays the role of political commodity. Governance and transformation processes find themselves in a complex – if not contradictory – environment in Ethiopia that on the one hand stimulates market-led and participatory approaches but on the other sustains hierarchy and political control. Our study draws from the literature on cross-sector partnerships and explores the role and strategies of facilitators of Integrated Seed Sector Development in mobilising sources of power to exercise control *over* the Regional Seed Core Group – a new governance arena – and *in* its contribution to transforming the seed sector. We attribute part of the success of their strategies to carefully blending hierarchical with collaborative modes of governance and strategically mobilising power of a formal authority. This first insight offers a contribution to the literature on collaborative governance that is predominantly based on cases from western societies and mature democracies. Our second insight is that ideational power from a non-state actor is a much-needed counterweight to formal authority. And third, whilst mobilising political power may be necessary in a context like Ethiopia – where having formal authority is a key asset for getting things done – it is not without risks. We share these insights not only for scientific debate, but also for policymakers and practitioners attempting to transform systems in similar contexts with a long tradition of centralising power.

1. Introduction

The government of Ethiopia recognises the importance of the seed sector to agriculture. For decades, it has strived to develop the seed sector through a top-down approach that is deeply rooted in the political history of Ethiopia (Alemu, 2011; Beko, 2017). In 2001, the government declared itself a 'developmental state' to underline its belief in the interventionist role the state must play in economic development and eradication of poverty (Vaughan, 2011; Gebresenbet, 2014; Brown and Fisher, 2020). Centralising the planning and allocation of seed for distribution was considered necessary for its equitable access across the country.

The effort has, however, faced several challenges resulting in inefficiencies like poor seed quality and shortages of seed in some parts of the country while large amounts are left unsold elsewhere. Due to the lack of correcting accountability mechanisms, these problems have persisted stubbornly (Alemu et al., 2010; Atilaw and Korbu, 2012; Benson et al., 2014; Mekonen et al., 2019; Mekonnen et al., 2021). Acknowledging its shortcomings, the government announced in 2016 that it wants to establish an "innovative market-led multi-sector seed system" (Ministry of Agriculture & Agricultural Transformation Agency, 2017). After years of political turmoil and the rise to power of Abiy Ahmed as new prime minister in 2018, the 'developmental state' as a model for economic growth and development was jettisoned – at least discursively – and the government set a reform agenda focussed on democratisation and liberalisation (Brown and Fisher, 2020).

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Several scholars have pointed out that despite the wish of government to embrace market-based and participatory approaches, top-down planning is still deeply rooted in the seed sector (Spielman et al., 2010; Alemu, 2011; Mulesa, 2021; Mulesa et al., 2021). Another major barrier to change is the role of seed as political commodity: the government's direct control over the distribution of seed is a very important instrument to gain political support from farmers (Berhanu and Poulton, 2014; Beko, 2017; Hailemichael & Haug, 2020). As a result, new policies and pilots find themselves in a complex, if not contradictory environment that on the one hand stimulates market-led and participatory approaches but on the other sustains hierarchy and political control.

In this article, we explore the role and strategies of facilitators of the Integrated Seed Sector Development (ISSD) programme (see Box 1) to guide the sector's transformation in this complex environment. For this purpose, we investigate how facilitators of ISSD mobilise sources of power to exercise control *over* the Regional Seed Core Group (RSCG) – a new governance arena – and *in* its contribution to transforming the seed sector in Oromia and Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR). We draw from the literature on cross-sector partnerships and offer a new framework for analysing power strategies in decision-making arenas. Applying this framework in the analysis of data collected from several secondary sources and key informant interviews and reflecting on the results, we extract lessons both for scientific debate and for policymakers and practitioners attempting to transform systems elsewhere in similar contexts with a long tradition of centralising power.

Box 1 Integrated Seed Sector Development in Ethiopia

The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs – through the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ethiopia – funded successive phases of the ISSD programme from 2009 to 2020 with more than €20 million. The vision of ISSD was a vibrant, pluralistic, and market-oriented seed sector, and its mission was to transform the seed sector to improve male and female smallholders' access to and use of quality seed of new, improved, and preferred varieties. To improve farmers access to and use of quality seed, ISSD piloted and successfully scaled several new business models and decentralised systems at local and regional state levels: local seed business models of quality seed production; direct seed marketing; contractual early generation seed supply; and decentralised seed regulatory service provision (Ministry of Agriculture, 2019; Borman et al., 2020; Mulesa, 2021; Mulesa et al., 2021). Instrumental in these achievements was the establishment of RSCGs. Borman et al. (2020) describe RSCGs as "groups of selected key decision makers in the regional state arena, including deputy heads of the [Bureaus of Agriculture], directors of research institutes, representatives of public and private seed producers and farmers' organisations, and coordinators of multi-/bi-lateral seed-related projects" that "formulate interventions aiming to overcome strategic challenges of the seed sector, and coordinate developments by facilitating partnerships for innovation, channelling financial and technical resources into interventions, monitoring and supporting interventions, and embedding successful interventions in the working practices" (p.7). Implementing ISSD in partnership with Wageningen University & Research, the Netherlands, were Oromia Seed Enterprise in Oromia and Hawassa University in SNNPR, among others in other regions as well. For more information see Borman et al. (2020).

2. Analytical framework

Dewulf and Elbers (2018) find that power imbalances are generally poorly understood in literature on cross-sector partnerships: first, existing frameworks are highly abstract and less useful for empirical research; second, no systematic distinction is made between direct and indirect power strategies (like agenda setting); and lastly, power dynamics tend to be analysed without considering the institutional environment in which they are embedded. To address the first and second limitation, Dewulf and Elbers (2018) distinguish power strategies from sources of power. Limiting power to 'having power' would not be helpful for our purpose to understand the role and strategies of ISSD facilitators (henceforth referred to simply as ISSD) in mobilising sources of power. Purdy (2012) assists us further by distinguishing 'arenas' from 'sources of power'. Three different types of arenas invoke the exercising of power: participants (who is to be involved); processes (what rules are to guide collective decision making); and contents (what issues to address).

We have simplified the framework of Purdy (2012) and distinguish between two sources of power: material resources; and ideational resources (Vij et al., 2019). Material resources refer to "financial capacity and human resources. Ideational resources refer to the ability to master, adapt and utilise ideas, knowledge and information" (p.573). Second, we address the different arenas for exercising power by distinguishing two different power strategies: power over the distribution of roles and responsibilities, membership, and agenda setting in the RSCGs; and power in the prioritisation of issues on the agenda, decision making on contents, and decision making on task division in implementation. Together, the two types of power strategies and two types of sources of power form our analytical framework (see Fig. 1).

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection

Data collection involved: (i) studying annual and evaluation reports of ISSD, focusing on data about the RSCGs; (ii) participating in two workshops on 'Seed Sector Governance' and 'Regional Seed Road Maps' and a training on 'Facilitating MSPs [multi-stakeholder partnerships]' organised in 2018; (iii) collecting meeting minutes; and (iv) identifying and interviewing key informants. Based on pragmatic and methodological considerations, the decision was made to focus on two of the four regional states where ISSD operated: Oromia and SNNPR (prior to its separation from Sidama and South West Ethiopia Peoples' Region). Selecting two states would not be too costly and time consuming yet provide sufficient basis for identifying similar and different ways in which ISSD exerted power over and in RSCGs. In addition to nine respondents working in Oromia and SNNPR, two senior ISSD officers with overall programme responsibility provided data. An extensive and theory-driven guide for in-depth interviews of the 11 respondents (see supplementary material S1) was prepared and followed. One of the authors, in the role of field researcher, trained and was assisted by two local experts in conducting the interviews.

3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis consisted of three steps. The first step was to reconstruct the establishment of the RSCGs and to get insight into the issues tabled at meetings, analysing ISSD reports and minutes of RSCG meetings for this purpose. The second step was to gain a general understanding of the position of stakeholders at the meetings and their sources of power, based on participatory observation and informal talks during the workshops. The third step was to analyse the transcripts of the interviews per RSCG in three rounds, using atlas.ti: first, the codes of 'actors', 'actions', 'sources' and 'aims' were used to label and group the data; second, the newly clustered data were further grouped, using 'power in' and 'power over' as classificatory codes; third, the specific dimensions of 'power over', 'power in', 'material resources' and 'ideational resources' (see Fig. 1) were used to label and group the data.

4. Results

Oromia is Ethiopia's largest state in terms of population and surface area, and also its biggest producer of seed. The RSCG of this state was established by ISSD in 2010. The group was first chaired by the regional manager of the Oromia Seed Enterprise – the regional implementing partner in ISSD – but in 2015, the deputy head of the Bureau of

	Use of material resources	Use of ideational resources
Power over: • Roles and responsibilities • Membership • Agenda setting		
Power in: • Prioritisation • Decision making • Task division		

Fig. 1. Analysing power strategies over and in the RSCGs (source: authors own elaboration).

Agriculture (BoA) accepted ISSD's invitation to take over. ISSD has served as the secretary of the group since the beginning. As per 2018, the RSCG consisted of nine members from governmental, semi-governmental, and non-state parties (see Table 1). During the period of investigation, the RSCG focussed on solving the bottlenecks of poor market linkages, limited supply of early generation seed, and weak regulatory oversight.

SNNPR was the fourth largest state in Ethiopia prior to its separation and third largest in which ISSD worked. The RSCG there was established by ISSD in 2010, with the Deputy Head of BoA accepting the position of chair. Since 2018, BoA has also fulfilled the role of secretary. As per 2018, the RSCG consisted of 12 members from governmental, semi-governmental and non-state parties (see Table 2). The RSCG of SNNPR focussed on scaling direct seed marketing and improving early generation seed supply during the period of investigation. Next to that, ISSD tried to establish a Regional Seed Unit – dedicated capacity within BoA – to help govern the seed sector.

Table 1
Members of the oromia RSCG in 2018.

Members	Mandate of office
1. Chair: BoA, Deputy Head [govt]	Responsible overall for agricultural development in the region
2. Secretary: ISSD [non-state]	Facilitate greater involvement of multiple stakeholders in identifying, prioritising, and overcoming seed sector challenges
3. BoA, Director Input [govt]	Govern all agricultural input, including the system of certified seed allocation and distribution
4. Regional Cooperative Promotion Agency [govt]	Establish and support agricultural cooperatives
5. Oromia Agricultural Research Institute [govt]	Develop, adapt, and promote agricultural technologies
6. Oromia Seed Enterprise [owned by government]	Meet the demand for quality seed by producing certified seed
7. Agricultural Transformation Agency [semi-govt]	Help catalyse and drive accelerated agricultural development
8. Agricultural Growth Program [externally funded programme of the government]	Increase agricultural productivity and market access for key crops and livestock products. Funded by the World bank and the Government of the Netherlands
9. Ethiopian Seed Association [non-state]	Promote the interests of members and the national seed industry

Explanation: 'govt' means governmental agency; 'semi-govt' means semi-governmental agency; 'non-state' means non-state agency.

Table 2
Members of the SNNPR RSCG in 2018.

Members	Mandate of office
1. Chair: BoA, Deputy Head [govt]	Responsible overall for agricultural development in the region
2. Secretary: BoA, Director Input and Rural Finance Supply [govt]	Govern all agricultural input, including the system of certified seed allocation and distribution
3. Agricultural Inputs Quality Control and Quarantine Authority [govt]	Provide seed regulatory services including certification
4. Agricultural Development Sector, Department of BoA [govt]	Responsible for extension as well as agricultural production
5. SNNPR Regional Cooperative Promotion Agency [govt]	Establish and support agricultural cooperatives
6. Ethiopian Coffee, Tea and Spice Authority [govt]	Support the development of the coffee, tea, and spice industry
7. Southern Agricultural Research Institute [govt]	Develop, adapt, and promote agricultural technologies
8. South Seed Enterprise [govt]	Meet the demand for quality seed by producing certified seed
9. Agricultural Transformation Agency [semi-govt]	Help catalyse and drive accelerated agricultural development
10. Agriculture Growth Program [externally funded programme of the government]	Increase agricultural productivity and market access for key crop and livestock products. Funded by the World bank and the Government of the Netherlands
11. Private Seed Producer Representative [non-state]	Produce certified seed for sale
12. ISSD [non-state]	Facilitate greater involvement of multiple stakeholders in identifying, prioritising, and overcoming seed sector challenges

Explanation: 'govt' means governmental agency; 'semi-govt' means semi-governmental agency; 'non-state' means non-state agency.

4.1. Power over the Regional Seed Core Group

4.1.1. Roles and responsibilities

In consultation with the then chair of the RSCG in Oromia – the manager of Oromia Seed Enterprise – ISSD invited who were considered key stakeholders and decision makers in the seed sector to join the RSCG. In 2015, it was agreed that BoA take over the position of chair. They did so for several reasons. First, ISSD wanted "to create ownership

with the Bureau" (R10), seen as the principal stakeholder to govern the seed sector. Second, BoA has "more political power than the manager of the seed enterprise" (R1). ISSD hoped that by transferring the chair to BoA, the RSCG would mobilise more power in an institutional environment where having formal authority is a key asset for getting things done. By inviting BoA to become chair, ISSD exerted its influence to (re) define roles and responsibilities within the RSCG.

Since the establishment of the RSCG of SNNPR, the deputy head of BoA had been its chair. After two years, the former deputy head was replaced by another: "When the [former] chairperson was in office, he was following it seriously. When he was changed, the new chairperson started from the beginning, and this affected the seed governance too" (R8).

Contrastingly with Oromia, the role of secretary of the RSCG in SNNPR was transferred from ISSD to the Director Input and Rural Finance Supply within BoA in 2018. According to the Director Input and Rural Finance Supply, the push for this decision did not originate from the RSCG itself but from the federal level: "This change is initiated at the national level actually. And more sort of an organogram, that has been designed at a national level for the core group. And we adopt that with a little bit of change" (R5). ISSD had quite a different take on the transfer of the role of secretary to BoA. First, they were not aware of any federal instruction on this transfer. Second, they considered the handing over of the role of secretary to BoA as important and part of the interest of ISSD "to institutionalise" the system (R4). Given this, ISSD believes that BoA too easily assumed the instruction to have come from a federal agency rather than leadership of ISSD working at national level.

Enjoying the position of both chair and secretary in SNNPR, BoA gained considerable power over the distribution of roles and responsibilities. The new secretary was reportedly very active, immediately calling for extra-ordinary meetings. Still, the new secretary could not prevent attendance rates from dropping: "When ISSD was facilitating, they came whenever we call, and members did not miss meetings. The attendance rate was 99%. Last week we were supposed to conduct a meeting, but it was postponed for the third time. […] I think it was due to budget problems; meetings were not conducted regularly, and the attendance rate was low. Here, I think, per diem matters. During ISSD period, per diem was paid to members" (R10). Several respondents also reported that the chair was not always present at the meetings, delegating the chairing to the secretary: "The chairman was very much tasked with cooling down political turmoil in Sidama zone of SNNPR, which finally became a region. As a result, the core group meeting could not be his priority" (R10).

4.1.2. Membership

When the RSCG was established in Oromia, it consisted of five members. Over the years, other stakeholders were invited to join. The main criterion was that a new member must be an expert and/or have direct stake in the seed sector. Whereas candidate members could only be accepted when there was consensus among all members, ISSD and BoA actively exerted influence to propose new members and reach consensus. For example, ISSD introduced the Agricultural Growth Program to the RSCG because of its financial contribution to the sector in the region and in follow-up to an agreement that ISSD had reached with the Agricultural Growth Program. In 2017, the Agricultural Growth Program signed an agreement with ISSD to, among other things, include its districts of operation in the direct seed marketing programme of the Agricultural Transformation Agency (ATA). In the same period that the Agricultural Growth Program became a member, BoA invited the Director of Seed Technology Multiplication of the Oromia Agricultural Research Institute to join the RSCG. The Bureau considered him a key technical resource person within the sector. With this director on board, it became much easier for ISSD to mobilise his expertise on seed technology for ISSD projects.

Meanwhile in SNNPR, the instruction that led to the change in secretary also prompted new membership. According to the Director of the Input and Rural Finance Supply of BoA, "At the early stage, the number of the core team was very few and included the two seed enterprises, research, ATA, extension and input. Its composition was changed after the federal instruction" (R5). Different sections of BoA joined subsequently, including the Agricultural Development Sector, as well as the Ethiopian Coffee, Tea and Spices Authority.

4.1.3. Agenda setting

ISSD and the Director Input and Rural Finance Supply of BoA, in the capacity of secretary of the RSCG in Oromia and SNNPR respectively, were responsible for planning the meetings and preparing the agenda. In Oromia, ISSD would send the agenda before every meeting, not only giving members time to react but also giving ISSD opportunity to lobby them. This was part of the overall strategy of ISSD to have regular contact with members, discuss topics and issues with them and use its ideational resources to convince them of pilots and programmes promoted by ISSD. In SNNPR, the Director Input and Rural Finance Supply of BoA only tabled an issue on the agenda once he had developed a clear sense of what and who should be involved in project implementation. He believed that "presenting an issue to the core team without a solution and task holder only consumes time" (R5).

ISSD specifically discussed the agenda before the meeting with one or two key members from which they needed support. If ISSD suspected that these members would not agree on an issue or a proposed action, then ISSD would try to convince them. ISSD certainly sought the support of BoA: "We don't need to enter into confrontation with him [BoA]. In case of struggles or challenges, you fix an appointment and then you go to his office to discuss it" (R1). If ISSD could not reach an agreement with BoA, they tried to convince other important players of the RSCG: "what I did at a point that I didn't reach an agreement with him [BoA], I thought maybe I reach an agreement with the guy from ATA. I go to him" (R1). The ATA representative in the RSCG in Oromia was not only an expert in the seed sector but also a former deputy head of BoA. This reportedly made his participation and voice in the RSCG very influential. The support of both BoA and ATA for the plans of ISSD were important to obtain quorum at the RSCG meetings: "I will discuss with them [BoA and ATA] and tell them what we do expect from that specific meeting, why that specific meeting is needed, why do we want to pilot or discuss our policy issues or agendas. Everything will be in some 50 to 60 percent approval if we obtain support from these guys" (R1).

In seeking support from members prior to the meeting, ISSD constantly used its ideational resources to exercise control over agenda setting. Through research, ISSD had identified several bottlenecks in the seed sector, that were each successfully put on the agenda of the RSCG (Woyema et al., 2019). For example, ISSD put the establishment of an independent regulatory authority on the agenda of the RSCG in Oromia. Initially, BoA was not willing to discuss this, not agreeing with the idea of an external body carrying out the regulatory function it currently served. Then ISSD decided to first discuss the issue with other members bilaterally with a view to get their support. This way ISSD eventually succeeded in convincing the majority of RSCG members of the need to establish an independent regulatory authority. Then BoA gave up its earlier objection and even embraced the idea: "After a lot of discussion and presentation, BoA owned the issue and accepted the [ISSD] report [on the need to establish an independent regulatory authority] because accepting becomes the only choice at that point" (R2).

A similar recollection of events leading to the piloting of direct seed marketing in Oromia was told. ISSD put the idea high on the agenda of the RSCG in Oromia but not all members welcomed it. Faced with limited enthusiasm, if not resistance, ISSD kept on pitching the idea and even arranged for the RSCG to visit Amhara region where piloting direct seed marketing was already underway. The manager of the seed enterprise said that, "ISSD played the bigger role in aggressively persuading and pitching the idea to the platform [the RSCG] and also involved some influential [external] people in the discussion and share their thoughts. For example, in one workshop I remember we involved people from the

bank to give more power to the discussion" (R2).

By directly or indirectly seeking support of members before the meetings and by using its knowledge and networks for this purpose, ISSD was able to effectively set the agenda and gain support from BoA and ATA as the most influential players. As a result, a majority or even all members agreed with the agenda and open conflict at the meeting was avoided. Direct seed marketing, community-based seed production, and an independent seed regulatory authority were all ideas promoted by ISSD that gradually the entire RSCG subscribed to, if not owned in the end.

Key players in the agenda-setting process in the latter years in SNNPR were BoA, ISSD and the Regional Seed Unit (RSU). Though not a member of the RSCG but a sub-committee, the RSU was very influential in setting the agenda. The RSU would propose an agenda to the secretary: "Agendas were initiated by the seed unit" (R8).

The idea to establish the RSU to help govern the seed sector reached the Federal Ministry of Agriculture, which allegedly "used it [RSU] to obtain data from the region and reinforce policy implementation" (R10). In contrast to ISSD's idea to establish the RSU within BoA with dedicated capacity to lead and coordinate developments in the seed sector more strategically, the Ministry instructed BoA to set it up as a sub-committee of the RSCG comprising different offices including ISSD and ATA. The RSU was given the task by the Ministry to identify bottlenecks, evaluate projects of the RSCG and make recommendations.

Not being secretary of the SNNPR RSCG anymore, ISSD had developed other ways to exercise control over the agenda-setting process. First, it used its membership of the RSU. Second, ISSD maintained close relationships with the secretary. Third, it visited offices of the member organisations with a view to get their support. For instance, to get the issue of improving early generation seed supply on the agenda, ISSD organised "bilateral discussions with different stakeholders: Bureau of Agriculture; Southern Agricultural Research Institute; South Seed Enterprise; and even the cooperative agency" (R4). This way, ISSD sought to establish coalition with other members. In the case of early generation seed supply, ISSD worked together with Southern Agricultural Research Institute to convince other members of its agenda, which was to differentiate early generation seed production. Southern Agricultural Research Institute was supportive of the agenda because they were solely responsible for producing early generation seed and overburdened. By granting private seed producers the responsibility to produce early generation seed, they would be able to focus on their research and variety development. Finally, ISSD also engaged with non-members to exercise control over the agenda-setting process. ISSD visited them and organised workshops to this end. "This route of bilateral discussion and a lot of workshops beyond the core group has been done to push agenda into reality" (R4). ISSD used both its ideational and material resources to convene these workshops.

4.2. Power in the Regional Seed Core Group

Whilst the chair and secretary obviously have distinctive roles, there was no formal hierarchy among members of the RSCG. However, there was certainly a power imbalance among them and, related to this, an informal code of discussion. This power imbalance and informal code were manifested in the prioritisation of issues at the meeting, decision making, and task division.

4.2.1. Prioritisation

At the beginning of every meeting, the agenda was discussed, or more specifically, what issues were to be given priority and what issues could potentially wait until the next meeting. Very often ideas and proposed projects of ISSD were tabled but also issues that impacted two or three members. At that stage of the meeting, BoA was listened to, not only because of its chairmanship but also because of its formal authority. "Before the discussion on the issues even started, the Bureau of Agriculture sometimes used this power to prioritise our key areas we should have to act on; the remaining issues we will talk the next", observed the ISSD facilitator (R1) in Oromia. The decision of BoA is not challenged or, even stronger, not to be challenged. In SNNPR, BoA always called attention to issues of seed shortage, using its position as chair and secretary to exercise control over the prioritisation at the beginning of each meeting. After its establishment, the RSU would present the agenda at meetings of the RSCG in SNNPR. The unit had no further responsibilities or authority during meetings but stayed to answer questions.

4.2.2. Decision making

After the prioritisation of issues, the discussion would start. On the one hand, this was very much a deliberate process in which issues were discussed, leading to consensus-based decision making. On the other hand, the opinions of BoA and ATA, both enjoying formal authority, very much 'guided' the decision-making process. If these opinions had been shaped by ISSD, one could say that these opinions basically reflect the ideas and plans of ISSD. Still, ISSD did not refrain from actively using its ideational resources to convince members of their plans: "ISSD played its part very well as its role is facilitating things they are involved [in], by giving access to studies that are done in the same issues, by forwarding better ideas as a discussion point, by presenting people from other [districts] that are already benefited by this system and forwarding their point based on their previous experiences to finally make a decision" (R2).

Whatever was discussed, BoA had the final word and other members would not challenge the decision. Overall, the interactions between members during the RSCG meeting were non-confrontational. This does not mean that there were no disagreements. These were just not articulated during meetings. Interviewees simply do not recall any big conflicts between members during meetings.

Since BoA accepted the position of chair of the RSCG in Oromia in 2015, three different individuals have represented it. Interestingly, the ISSD officer experienced that it was not these changes that led to a more open attitude of BoA to ideas of ISSD and other members, but the regime change in 2018: "The image we had about the officials before this regime change was that it was not easy to have discussion with them. One could certainly not confront them. Since 2018, after Abiy took office, the culture has been changing. The door is open, they want to discuss with you" (R1). This new openness also created more room for members to engage in discussion and influence decisions at the meetings of the RSCG. Still, it was BoA who had the final say on issues and project proposals.

Once prioritisation had taken place, discussion and decision making would begin. Since the issues had already been prioritised, discussion was relatively smooth. Several respondents stated that they did not encounter any heated debate on issues. For decision making, a majority vote counted. A senior representative of ISSD stated that, "They have to accept the interest of the majority. This is how things are posed in our core group. Someone may initially not agree. However, if the majority supports that idea, they have to follow" (R7).

This does not mean that every member had the same power, and even the same kind of power, over the decision making of the RSCG. BoA was a key decision maker because of its formal authority and knowledge about problems and demands in the region, also thanks to data and insights provided by the RSU in SNNPR. Although not everything could be decided by BoA at the RSCG, its consent was essential. Given that ISSD had no formal authority to influence discussion at the RSCG meetings, it used its expertise and ability to frame issues to do so.

4.2.3. Task division

After decisions had been made on project proposals, the RSCG discussed who would oversee a project and would implement it. As all important players of the seed sector participated in the RSCG, in nearly all cases the implementing agency was a member. If a project fell within the expertise, mandate or working area of a member organisation, it would most likely be assigned to that member. In most cases, this was a

government agency as a non-state organisation could always decline to take it up. For example, while ATA did not agree with the idea to use cooperatives to expand direct seed marketing in SNNPR, it accepted the decision of the majority and with-it project responsibility. Interestingly, ATA did not allocate their own resources for the implementation of the project. Instead, the RSCG mobilised the material resources of other members, mostly ISSD and the Regional Cooperative Promotion Agency, to fund the project.

Sometimes there were disagreements between members on the allocation of projects, but these were not expressed during the meetings. If at all, disagreements were shared bilaterally and/or informally after the RSCG meeting. For instance, on a project on producing lentil seed: ISSD had convinced the RSCG to give an assignment to a federal research centre to produce lentil early generation seed because of its expertise, which was lacking in the RSCG. However, Oromia Agricultural Research Institute (an RSCG member) was not happy with this decision because they wanted to produce the early generation seed themselves. They shared their displeasure with ISSD that in turn had to use quite some social capital to convince Oromia Agricultural Research Institute that the federal research centre was simply better equipped for the job.

Whilst ISSD did avail budget to co-fund project implementation, its financial resources were not that big, according to the staff member of the Regional Cooperative Promotion Agency in Oromia: "I believe ISSD is rich in ideas but not really big in the budget side. It focuses mainly on capacity building and workshops but if the ideas would be pursued in a larger manner, I believe they can bring over drastic change to the agricultural sector" (R3). ISSD put it in a similar way: "I define our contribution not as big finance, for example for the training and expansion of direct seed marketing [districts], we funded some 200, 300 thousand, but [Agricultural Growth Program] funded a huge amount: a million Birr. The Bureau of Agriculture and the rest of the core group expect ideas and facilitation from us" (R1).

5. Discussion and conclusions

Our study shows what tenacity is required of a non-state actor to usher in more market-based and participatory approaches in a country with a long and still vivid tradition of centralising power. It also demonstrates the value of collaboration in governance and transformation processes, or at least in this case the effort that went into mobilising different sources of power and building coalitions to pilot and scale new business models and regulatory systems in Ethiopia. Based on our understanding of the role and strategies of ISSD in the RSCGs and seeing the effort as a complex power struggle, we present three insights for scientific debate on complex governance and transformation processes and one recommendation for further study. We also translate wherever possible these insights into recommendations for policymakers and practitioners looking to achieve similar outcomes elsewhere.

Our first insight is that the governance and transformation processes in a political context like Ethiopia's – where a great deal of the economy is still centrally planned – require giving power *over* and *in* the decision-making arena to an agency with formal and political authority. Whilst this may seem counterintuitive given that the tradition of central planning and role of seed as a political commodity are part of the problem in this study, we reached this conclusion because final decision will nevertheless still be taken by such an agency. This is almost certainly the case when nearly all participants in decision making are state and semi-state actors and the decision is never challenged during discussion. Furthermore – and of equal importance – the decision has higher likelihood of being implemented afterwards if taken by a formal authority.

The participation of BoA was needed to make the RSCGs work as a platform for introducing new models and systems in the seed sector. It is the formal and political authority of BoA that prevented the RSCGs to suffer from – what Woldesenbet (2020) describes as – "the absence of a prehistory of collaboration" in Ethiopia. Woldesenbet (2020) recognises that processes of collaboration among stakeholders in governance are less studied in Africa and Ethiopia, and although his thematic field (urban water projects) is not the same as ours, we think his conclusions are relevant. They are a clear message to anyone who believes that achieving collaborative governance in Ethiopia is easy.

The results of this study show that the processes of multi-stakeholder dialogues are handicapped by the absence of prehistory of collaborations, asymmetrical pre-deliberation communication, and the representation of stakeholders by individuals with no experience or the required expertise, and the lack of willingness among stakeholders to engage in the process of dialogues (Woldesenbet, 2020, p.1).

The experience of ISSD shows a delicate and long-term effort to develop a collaborative form of governance in Ethiopia. It was not a matter of simply replacing hierarchical with collaborative modes of governance but blending the two (Khan et al., 2017). Our case study offers a contribution to the literature on collaborative governance that is predominantly based on cases from western societies and consolidated democracies (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Batory and Svensson, 2019; Douglas et al., 2020). Emerson et al. (2012) state that, "For many public administration scholars, collaborative governance is the new paradigm for governing in democratic systems" (p.3).

Our second insight is that ideational power from a non-state actor is a much-needed counterweight to formal authority in preventing that collaboration becomes a cover for and instrument of central planning, implementation, and control. Using its ideas, knowledge, and information on problems of the seed sector as well as concrete ideas on how to solve them, ISSD used its ideational resources to exercise control over the agenda setting and final decisions of BoA. This was more than just a matter of sharing ideas, knowledge, and information, but also championing them bilaterally, building coalitions, and inviting stakeholders to present their problems and solutions. ISSD was keen enough to target formal authorities in the agenda-setting and decision-making processes, being BoA, ATA and – in the case of SNNPR – also the RSU. Development practitioners should not be disinclined to engage with government.

Having said this, it would be too simplistic to conclude that it is only the problem statements and ideas of ISSD that drive the RSCGs and steer its decision making on what transformation to pursue. In both an indirect and direct way, ISSD has also been using its material power. Due to its long-term donor funding, ISSD has human resources that have been used to develop ideas and to engage with all relevant stakeholders in the seed sector. By providing per diem to participants of the RSCG meeting and co-funding pilot projects and upscaling, ISSD has used its financial resources to secure high attendance rates at meetings and implementation of projects. Budgeting for such kinds of expenditure should be considered by policymakers and practitioners for 'buying' greater 'buy-in'.

Before presenting our third insight, we first need to highlight differences between the two RSCGs in terms of power dynamics. In the case of Oromia, ISSD was able to use its ideational resources and role as secretary to direct the agenda-setting and decision-making processes. ISSD was able to convince BoA as the chair to accept many of its proposals. In the case of SNNPR, ISSD was less in control. ISSD did use its ideational resources over and in the RSCG but the role of secretary, like chair, was with BoA. Due to political turmoil in SNNPR, the chair could not give priority to the RSCG, and herewith ISSD could not use the chair to second its ideas. In addition, the idea of ISSD of establishing the RSU as a new department of BoA was appropriated and twisted by the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry gave instruction to install the RSU as a sub-committee of the RSCG but more importantly it changed its function: whereas ISSD had envisaged that the RSU could strengthen the ability of BoA to govern the transformation of the seed sector, the RSU became an instrument of the Ministry to obtain data from the regional state and reinforce policy implementation.

By far, the most strategic move ISSD made was to invite BoA to chair each RSCG. It paid off. There is a caveat, however. Inviting an agency with formal and political authority to chair new and more participatory decision-making arenas may be justified and necessary in a country like

Ethiopia, but it also poses serious risks. This brings us to our third and final insight. The first risk is that this agency cannot reliably perform the intended function when it – as an office of an elected official – must give foremost priority to politics and resolving political turmoil. This was evident in our case in SNNPR. The chair function also proved vulnerable to staff turnover, which is common among political appointees. When an official was changed, a lot of groundwork had to be repeated. The second risk is that authorities may use their formal powers to appropriate and twist the purpose of the platform: case in point being the RSU in SNNPR. This can enable new top-down management by government and undermine efforts to challenge the status quo. Concerned policymakers and practitioners should invest in generating the political intelligence and social capital required for being able to walk this tightrope. That implies being prepared to make a longer-term investment upfront.

We recommend greater interdisciplinarity or at least conversation among scholars of cross-sector partnerships (van Tulder et al., 2016; Clarke and Crane, 2018), collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012), policy entrepreneurship (Mintrom and Norman, 2009), and systems thinking (Checkland, 1981; Giddens, 1984; Prigogine and Stengers, 1984; Jackson, 1985; Ulrich, 1988) in unpacking transformation in a complex socio-technical system – like governing the seed sector in Ethiopia – given the importance of context as demonstrated in this case. Institutional environments and institutional histories certainly play a role in determining the dynamics and quality of dialogue and collaboration among stakeholders (Woldesenbet, 2020). Furthermore, governance and transformation processes do not happen in a vacuum of power and cannot be understood without a greater appreciation of the importance of institutions and power struggles among participants in decision making. We think that the theory on policy entrepreneurship in particular could shed more light on our own study. Whilst not explicitly cognisant of power and power strategies, policy entrepreneurship could further explain the competencies of ISSD in framing problems, using and expanding networks, working with advocacy coalitions, leading by example, and scaling up change processes (Mintrom, 2019). We recognise these strategies reflecting on the data. We also ponder to what extent an aptitude for systems thinking empowers these competencies, or to what extent systems thinking was part and parcel to the training of facilitators employed by ISSD. We strongly suspect it was.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gfs.2022.100650.

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