

From Assessment to Action: Governance Strengthening for Stronger Multi-Stakeholder Platforms

Lessons from an East African Multistakeholder Platforms-peer exchange
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Background

The Intersector Forum on Agrobiodiversity and Agroecology (ISFAA), Kenya's national multi-stakeholder platform (MSP) for promoting agroecology and conserving agricultural biodiversity, recently conducted an Organizational Capacity Assessment (OCA) and governance review. The exercise generated valuable insights and lessons on strengthening platform governance, organisational effectiveness, stakeholder engagement, and long-term sustainability of multi-stakeholder platforms (MSP) across East Africa, which were shared during an online MSP peer exchange.

Access the learnings of the MSP-peer exchange here: [Presentation](#)



Key Messages

- Several dimensions determine whether an MSP functions: clear purpose, shared agenda, meaningful and inclusive participation, clear governance and accountability, sufficient capacity, financial and institutional stability, and mechanisms for learning, evidence and results.
- A functioning platform requires: sufficient staff, skills, resources, authority, legitimacy and systems for coordination, planning, communication, documentation, and follow-up.
- Strategic plans alone are insufficient; they need to be translated into annual operational plans and supported by functioning administrative systems. It is essential that these roles, responsibilities, authority, and accountability must be written down and understood. An MSP needs clarity over who makes decisions, who implements them, who provides oversight and how conflicts are managed. Otherwise, responsibility becomes diffuse and accountability weak.
- MSPs should not depend excessively on single individuals or organisations (e.g. chairperson, coordinator, host organisation or donor); documented systems, shared ownership, delegation, succession planning, institutional memory and developing people who can assume leadership responsibilities are all key steps to mitigate dependence.



Frequently Asked Questions about Multi-Stakeholder Platforms

General governance and coordination, funding, decision-making

What is the basis for a functional, structural, and action-oriented operational systems for MSP?

A functional MSP needs a clear purpose for its existence, governance structure, defined roles, decision-making processes, an operational plan, a functional Secretariat, active thematic working groups, institutional systems like communication and knowledge-management, MEL, financial procedures, and resource-mobilisation arrangements.

For instance, in ISFAA, a clear organisational structure exists, consisting of a steering committee, secretariat and five thematic working groups, with the working groups serving as the main implementation arm. The ISFAA assessment found that the main challenge was not lack of relevance or stakeholder support, but weak institutional systems. MSPs need to move from personality-driven coordination to **system-driven operations**. Additional improvements in operational systems have included a governance charter, decision-making matrix, job descriptions, consolidated SOPs covering HR, finance and operations, fund-hosting protocols, a communication strategy and a resource-mobilisation plan.

How can an MSP be adequately managed? And how can the various roles within the MSP be coordinated effectively?

Effective management requires a functional and adequately resourced secretariat, together with **explicit governance arrangements**. Roles and responsibilities should be documented through a governance charter and terms of reference, while decision-making authority should be clarified through mechanisms such as a RACI matrix defining who is Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed. Systems are also required for planning, communication, documentation, implementation and follow-up. The management of an MSP should be based on a clear separation of roles between the Steering Committee/board, Secretariat, TWGs and members. The Steering Committee provides strategic oversight and accountability; the Secretariat manages day-to-day coordination and implementation; TWGs provide technical leadership and deliver agreed actions; and members contribute expertise, resources, networks and implementation capacity. The RACI is important because it helps to eliminate overlaps between the Steering Committee and Secretariat and TWGs.

Tips and advice

It is recommended to use a RACI matrix - Responsible, Accountable, Consulted, and Informed - to clarify decision-making authority on various topics of your MSP. See below an example of a RACI matrix for programme implementation across the different structures of the MSP

Code	Meaning	Explanation	Function	SC	Secretariat	TWGs	Membership
R	Responsible	Performs the work and delivers outputs	Programme prioritisation	A	R	C	C/I
A	Accountable	Final decision authority; owns the outcome	Activity coordination	I	A/R	R	C/I
C	Consulted	Provides advice, expertise and input	Technical content development	I	C	A/R	C/I
I	Informed	Receives updates and communication	Stakeholder coordination	I	A/R	C	C/I

What type of funding arrangement can MSPs use?

MSPs should diversify their income streams rather than depend on one source. In the short term, an MSP without legal personality can use transparent and standardized fund-hosting arrangements with agreed roles, budgets, reporting and oversight. For instance, implementation can be carried out by thematic working groups, through multiple donor-funded projects managed by a member/host organization. In the medium term, it can develop its own legal and financial autonomy. Funding can combine donor grants, government or partner support, member contributions or in-kind contributions, and resources mobilised through members. However, MSPs should complement, not compete with, their members for funding or project opportunities. Their value lies in addressing challenges that individual actors cannot tackle alone, such as facilitating sensitive policy reforms, coordinating collective advocacy, and developing multi-stakeholder knowledge products.



Stakeholder participation and inclusion

How do stakeholders generally contribute to MSPs?

Stakeholders contribute through participation, diverse expertise, sharing different perspectives, implementation and ownership of the platform. In an MSP, each stakeholder should have a defined contribution linked to its comparative advantage: government should provide policy leadership and enable policy uptake; farmers and communities bring lived experience and practical knowledge; CSOs support mobilisation, advocacy and implementation; research and academia provide evidence and innovation; private sector brings markets, investment, technologies and value-chain expertise; and development partners/donors can provide technical and financial resources. An MSP should make these contributions explicit through its membership framework, TWG responsibilities, annual workplan and partnership agreements.

What methodology can be used to identify the stakeholders of the MSP?

In most MSPs for agroecology, membership is open to institutions working and aligned with agroecology and agrobiodiversity. It includes government, farmer organisations, civil society, private sector, research and academia. While initial membership might be based on initial interests of already connected actors, **stakeholder mapping** can help to enlarge and consolidate the membership of MSP. The MSP should identify all actors affected by or able to influence agroecology; categorise them by constituency and level; assess their interests, influence, knowledge, resources and potential contribution; identify gaps in representation; and then prioritise engagement approaches. MSPs should strive to actively recruit underrepresented groups.

How is active and meaningful participation of all members ensured?

Meaningful participation is promoted by ensuring that stakeholders are properly represented and regularly informed, their voices are heard, they can influence decisions, and they understand the value of participating. The **value proposition** is particularly important as a means of increasing engagement. Participation should therefore go beyond attendance and include influence, responsibility, ownership and follow-through on agreed actions. The important questions are whether the right stakeholders are represented, whose voices are missing, who influence decisions, and whether members' views affect outcomes. MSPs should also provide a structured onboarding, predictable communication, opportunities to lead or contribute through TWGs, transparent decision-making processes, access to information, and feedback mechanisms. Members should have clearly defined roles and opportunities to influence priorities and contribute to implementation.

“Having many members does not automatically make a platform inclusive.”

Innocent Misiko, Organization Development Specialist



What is the experience of MSPs in cases of low stakeholder commitment? How to improve this situation?

Very often, some members are dormant: they do not attend meetings regularly, or attend without actively contributing. A key response is the development of a value proposition so that members could understand what they gain from participation, including opportunities to contribute to policy influence. Ensuring that members' voices are heard is also identified as important for improving meaningful participation. MSPs need to make participation useful, predictable and purposeful. Members are more likely to remain engaged when they see tangible value, understand their role, receive timely information, participate in meaningful decisions and see that agreed actions produce results. Besides value proposition, other practical measures include matching members to relevant TWGs, assigning specific deliverables, recognising contributions, improving communication, and periodically reviewing membership. ISFAA's experience suggests that voluntary commitment can be sustained, but requires stronger systems, clearer roles and better coordination.

MEL and review

How can an MSP collect information on implementation progress of decided measures/actions from relevant stakeholders?

An MSP should establish a simple MEL framework with agreed indicators, reporting responsibilities and reporting periods, rather than relying on ad hoc information. Each TWG and member organisation can report against a small set of agreed indicators through standard quarterly templates, complemented by periodic surveys, case studies, policy-tracking and learning sessions. The Secretariat should consolidate the information into a quarterly dashboard or progress report for the Steering Committee and members. Besides, implementation should be systematically tracked from inputs and activities through outputs, outcomes and impact, rather than measuring performance merely through meetings or activities. For example, a relevant result is not merely that four meetings occurred, but whether those meetings generated a joint position and whether that position subsequently influenced policy. Monitoring, evaluation and learning is often identified as an area that still requires strengthening. In ISFAA, MEL was identified as a priority for improvement; reporting templates, protocols and reporting structures have been developed and are currently being strengthened. Communicating about your results is finally important, for instance, with a communication strategy in place.



Tips and advice

Platforms should track the chain from inputs → activities → outputs → outcomes → impact.

“MSPs can hold regular meeting and establish working groups while achieving very little”
Innocent Misiko, Organization Development Specialist

How can an organizational capacity assessment help an MSP?

An organizational capacity assessment is a systemic assessment of the platform, beyond its most visible issues: purpose/value proposition, membership and representation, governance and decision-making, participation and engagement, secretariat capacity, financing, and performance/results. That diagnosis should determine an improvement roadmap. An OCA provides a baseline for understanding where the platform is functioning well, where systems are weak and what should be prioritised, and creates a shared basis for action among diverse stakeholders.

For instance, the assessment of ISFAA showed it has considerable strengths: an important mandate, diverse stakeholders, government participation, thematic working groups, and substantial stakeholder commitment. However, these strengths do not automatically produce institutional effectiveness. We often see weaknesses in areas such as HR, finance, secretariat capacity, monitoring and evaluation, and formal governance. Following its assessment, ISFAA worked on clearer job descriptions, a governance charter, a decision-making matrix, SOPs covering HR/finance/operations, fund-hosting protocols, a communication strategy, and a resource-mobilisation plan.



Tips and advice

An MSP should regularly ask the following seven questions:

1. Purpose: Why does our MSP/ITF exist? What problem stakeholders are collectively trying to solve, and what they can achieve together that individual organisations could not.
2. Membership: Who needs to be at the table but is not?
3. Governance: Who makes which decision?
4. Engagement: Are members influencing decisions or simply attending? Stakeholders should understand why participation is worthwhile.
5. Performance: What has our MSP/ITF actually achieved?
6. Sustainability: What happens if our current funding ends?
7. Learning: What have we changed because of what we have learned?

Structures and mandates

What is the mandate of the Steering Committee? What is its composition versus the composition of the secretariat?

The Steering Committee provides strategic governance and oversight, including approving strategy, annual plans, budgets, partnerships and major decisions, while holding the Secretariat accountable. Its mandate also includes developing internal policies, overseeing implementation or recruiting the secretariat.

At ISFAA, the Steering Committee represents different stakeholder groups: government holds the chair, while other constituencies such as civil society, farmer organisations, research and academia are represented. The steering committee is also composed of Thematic Working group leaders. On the other hand, the Secretariat should be a lean operational structure responsible for day-to-day coordination, communication, documentation, implementation support and reporting. Its composition should reflect the competencies needed to perform these functions rather than replicate the broad stakeholder representation of the Steering Committee.

What are the various thematic working groups of an MSP?

TWGs should be organised around the priority technical and policy issues that the MSP needs to advance, rather than created simply for representation. Each TWG should have a clear mandate, lead, membership, annual deliverables, workplan, reporting mechanism and link to the overall MSP strategy. MSPs should strive to strengthen TWG structures, authority and annual deliverables. Thematic working groups provide the main mechanism through which stakeholders translate broader discussions into focused technical action and carry out much of the implementation.

The TWGs under ISFAA are: 1) Private Sector, Consumers and Markets TWG, 2) Policy and Advocacy TWG, 3) County Engagement TWG, 4) Seed sovereignty Biosafety, and Climate Change TWG and 5) Knowledge Management TWG. Another example, in the Murang'a Agroecology MSP, the five TWGs are: 1) Policy and Resource Mobilization, 2) Research, Innovation and, Knowledge Management, 3) Partnerships, Networking and Membership, 4) Data, M&E and Farmer engagement, 5) Marketing and Private Sector Engagement .

Do MSPs explicitly strengthen the capacities of its individual member organisations through learning, mentoring and sharing best practices?

Practical models in MSP can include technical exchanges, mentoring, joint training, knowledge products, communities of practice and documentation of member innovations. An MSP should distinguish between strengthening the capacity of the platform itself and strengthening individual members, while using the latter to improve collective performance. The process should ideally start with capacity-needs assessments and annual training plan, alongside knowledge-management and learning systems.

In the case of ISFAA, there was no structured member-capacity-strengthening mechanism in place. Knowledge management and learning had, however, been identified for development, including possibilities such as collaborative learning and adapting (CLA) sessions and institutional peer learning.

How do MSPs at different levels (national-subnational) relate to each others? Do MSP need to be institutionalized?

ISFAA and relevant county-level MSPs function as connected but autonomous entities. However, the assessment noted this missed opportunity for systematic county engagement within ISFAA.

ISFAA being a national platform should provide policy coordination, evidence, learning and national-level advocacy, while county platforms should translate priorities into context-specific action and feed implementation experience back to the national level. Institutionalisation is not necessarily about becoming a large bureaucracy; it should mean establishing adequate governance, operational, financial and accountability systems to ensure continuity while preserving the adaptive and collaborative nature of an MSP. Excessive formalisation can create rigidity and risks of elite capture or bureaucratic control.



Formation, renewal, lifespan

How should an MSP be formed?

In an ideal situation, an MSP should start with a clearly defined shared problem, purpose and value proposition, followed by stakeholder mapping, consultation and agreement on the platform's mandate, membership, governance, decision-making and operating principles. It should then establish an appropriate coordination mechanism, initial workplan and resource arrangements, with systems developing progressively as the platform matures. In other words, form the platform around a genuine collective need rather than around an organisational structure first. ISFAA describes MSPs as spaces for actors from different sectors to exchange knowledge, build consensus, coordinate actions and pursue shared solutions. In the example of the Vihiga AE-MSP, they brought together initial motivated partners and county departments, held meetings to agree on the vision and structure. The initial step is often to establish a steering committee/secretariat and gradually form the MSP.

What is the lifespan of an MSP?

An MSP does not necessarily need a predetermined end date. Its lifespan should depend on whether the collective problem, coordination need and value proposition remain relevant. Some platforms may become permanent institutions; others may evolve, merge, decentralise or close once their purpose has been achieved. The key is to periodically review the mandate, relevance, membership, performance and sustainability rather than assuming that an MSP must exist indefinitely. For instance, the Vihiga AE-MSP has no predetermined lifespan, while the Tanzanian ITF's lifespan is tied to the relevant National Ecological Organic Agriculture Strategy (NEOAS), currently through 2030 and subject to review.

When government representatives in an MSP leave elected/public office, should MSP membership belong to the individual or to the office/position?

For institutional continuity, membership should generally be linked to the office or institutional mandate rather than the individual, with a formally designated representative and a clear handover when that person leaves office. This reduces dependence on personalities and protects institutional memory. The outgoing representative should hand over relevant information, decisions and commitments to the incoming representative. This requires clear succession planning, tenure arrangements and procedures for replacing representatives when they leave office.

