

SUPPORTING INNOVATION PROGRAMMES IN AFRICA: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Mansoor Ali

ABSTRACT

This paper is based on the author's experience of supporting innovation programmes in basic services across African countries between 2016 to date. The paper's background explains the need for innovation programming and emerging expectations from the governments and donors. The paper explains how this type of programming is different from traditional practices. In delivery, innovation programmes require an approach to take risks, do things differently, try out new approaches, learn continuously and regularly accept failures to improve the next action. The innovation in planning and practice expects to work with a range of stakeholders, often called 'eco-system' actors (Erik and Michiel, 2008). It expects to build on collective effort and collaboration to deliver the results. This includes governments support for innovation and for creation of space for this. The private sector is expected to invest in risk taking and users should reflect back on their experience of working with innovation. Innovation is also dependent on many small sized and invisible actors who could make things happen. Designing innovation programmes is different from traditional programming, as these programmes are expected to learn, adapt and change. Innovation programmes embrace complexity and non-linearity (Ramalingam and Jones, 2008) in their project cycles and have regular feedback loops within the project cycle. These programmes are assessed on the basis of new thinking, ideas and enhanced confidence of the innovator as compared to the situation at the start of the programme. Exit strategies and closure of innovation programming are also different, as compared to traditional programming. Innovation programmes are expected to show sustainability and adaptation by stakeholders, especially by the market and business. Increased knowledge, learning and interest of the business are some of the key indicators to be tested at the programme closing stage. Author's own experience suggests that, the key to success of innovation programming is about learning and the ability to integrate innovation principles into the project selection, management and closures. Innovation programming is in early days and one of the main risks is that if innovation programming is managed as traditional programming it loses important principles. Based on author's overall experience, the paper makes recommendations on the preparation, selection and management of innovation programmes in low income industrializing countries.