

Co-evolution: innovation and transformative change by smallholder farmer communities.



Enabling Rural Innovation from the Future.

Merging ERI and Theory U

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Introduction: Facing Complexity

Today humanity faces a systemic disorder – a dysfunctional system which creates outcomes that are undesirable like climate change, global inequality and poverty. People in rural areas around the globe face a diverse set of life conditions and a context which has increased in complexity as well as in the scope of change. This puts enormous demands on international cooperation in rural development, which so far has failed in dealing with the rising complexity. To handle complexity it is necessary to extend the perspective in several dimensions: spatial, temporal, perceptual (1st, 2nd, 3rd ...positions), subtlety and to take into account that systems are interlinked / embedded as well as the internal / external, individual / collective aspects of them. A complex adaptive system perspective seems promising in a rural development context. Hall and Clark (2010) show how a complex adaptive system perspective can be used to describe adaptation processes in rural Uganda and what such a system could look like. Most of the rural development projects today operate on the surface with a clear focus on the external side of change. To overcome this shortcomings profound new ways in which we carry out international cooperation need to be explored. Ways to assist communities to access their potential and unfold their selves individual as well as collective.

Adapting to changing life conditions requires innovation. Innovation capacity and adaptive capacity are therefore closely linked. Innovation in the rural development context can be defined as “a change in how social groups think about their activities [which] leads to a sustained change in how they act / behave in their daily activities to better cope with their work environment and life conditions” (de Faria 2013a, 1). “[...] Innovation takes place when new behaviour results from a change in values and beliefs” (de Faria 2013b, 1). From this definitions it becomes evident, that innovation has an important internal dimension and that it depends on internal drivers. It requires for instance creativity and a believe that it is feasible. Creativity as a spontaneous process can not be commanded. This insight points towards the sensitivity of the process, difficulties to create an enabling environment and the crucial role of the facilitator. An innovation goes far beyond an invention and takes place in a multi-stakeholder network (Hauser 2013, 3). From a complex adaptive system perspective innovation can be seen as an emerging pattern within the system. “Emergence arises trough interaction and energetic pressure as opposed to the actions of any alone individual” (Brown 2011, 4). It depends on external drivers – an enabling environment – as well as on internal drivers. The

facilitation of an innovation process needs to take both sides into account.

This paper examines two approaches to change: the Enabling Rural Innovation (ERI) Framework, which focus on the external side and Theory U with a focus on the internal side. It is argued that both combined can capture the innovation process more holistic and therefor can be beneficial for facilitation in rural development cooperation. Finally the outline of an innovation journey using the combined framework and aspects of the facilitation process will be explored.

The External Side: Enabling Rural Innovation

“The [ERI] initiative is a research for development framework that uses participatory approaches to strengthen the capacity of research and development (R&D) partners and rural communities to access and generate technical and market information for improving farmers' decision making” (Kaaria et al. 2008a, 54). It is argued that this capacity mediate to enable innovation. The aim of the ERI approach is capacity building. In doing so it is market oriented and uses participatory approaches in every stage of the innovation process (Kaaria et al. 2008a, 55). Figure 1 shows the various steps of the ERI.

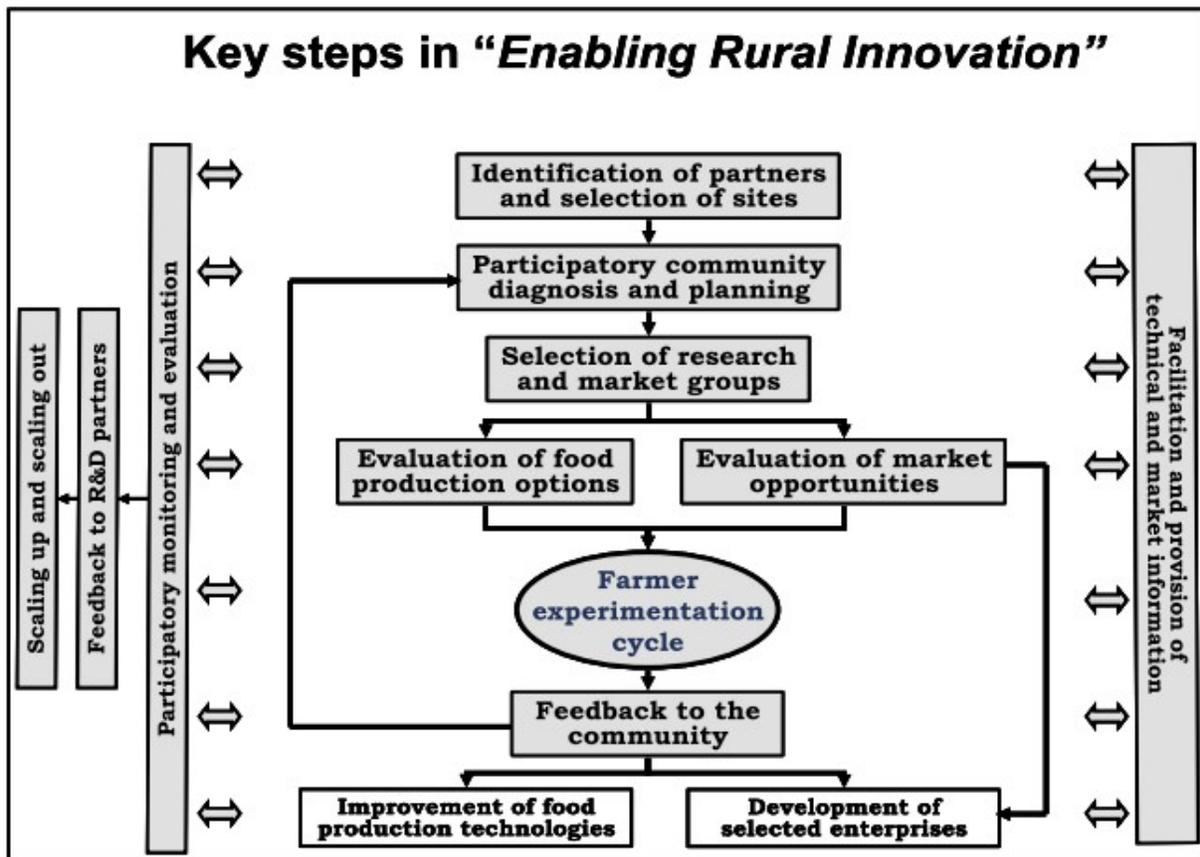


Figure 1: Key Steps to Enabling Rural Innovation (Kaaria et al. 2008b)

An assessment of the ERI approach at two study sites showed a significant increase in farmers' abilities. Particular the farmers actively engaged in one of the committees improved their skills (Kaaria et al. 2008a, 59f). Evaluated against its aim to build up knowledge and skills the ERI performs well at the study sites.

The Internal Side: Theory U

The sentence “I attend [this way] – therefore it emerges [that way]” puts Theory U in a Nutshell. In doing so a third dimension is introduced to our action. We have results we produce, processes that we use for this and a source from which we operate. This is our blind spot because normally we are not aware of the place from which we attend to the world. The structure of the attention is crucial for the results we gain (Scharmer 2009, 6ff). To make this more tangible a little thought experiment might be useful. If you ask yourself: “Who am I”, you will hear a voice in your head (the result), you have the act of thinking (the process), which can be described from different perspectives e.g. the interaction of neurons. But where does this act of thinking originate from. Who is this thinker and does it can become an object to itself?

Also in development cooperation we have results and often these are not the ones we aim to achieve. We have processes, which lead to these results. The farmers first movement (Chambers et al. 1989) shifted the focus on this dimension through reflection on the way development projects and research are done e.g. including participatory elements and methods. Here the same question arises: Where does this Processes originate from? The next step in development cooperation is to include the place from which we operate in our awareness. The blind spot both on the community and on the facilitator side has to be taken into account. Our understanding needs to include this dimension.

Theory U describes a process which helps us to illuminate our blind spots on collective and individual level, thereby shifting the place from which we attend to the world and connecting us to our highest future possibility resulting in transformational change (Scharmer 2009, 27ff). Figure 2 shows the U process with its phases (Downloading, Seeing, Sensing, Presencing, Crystallizing, Prototyping, Performing), the three capabilities which needs to be accessed (Open Mind, Open Heart, Open Will), the activities which lead to the crossing of the thresholds (suspending, redirection, letting go, letting come, enacting, embodying) and the resistance which keep us from doing so (Voice of Fear, Voice of Cynicism, Voice of Fear).

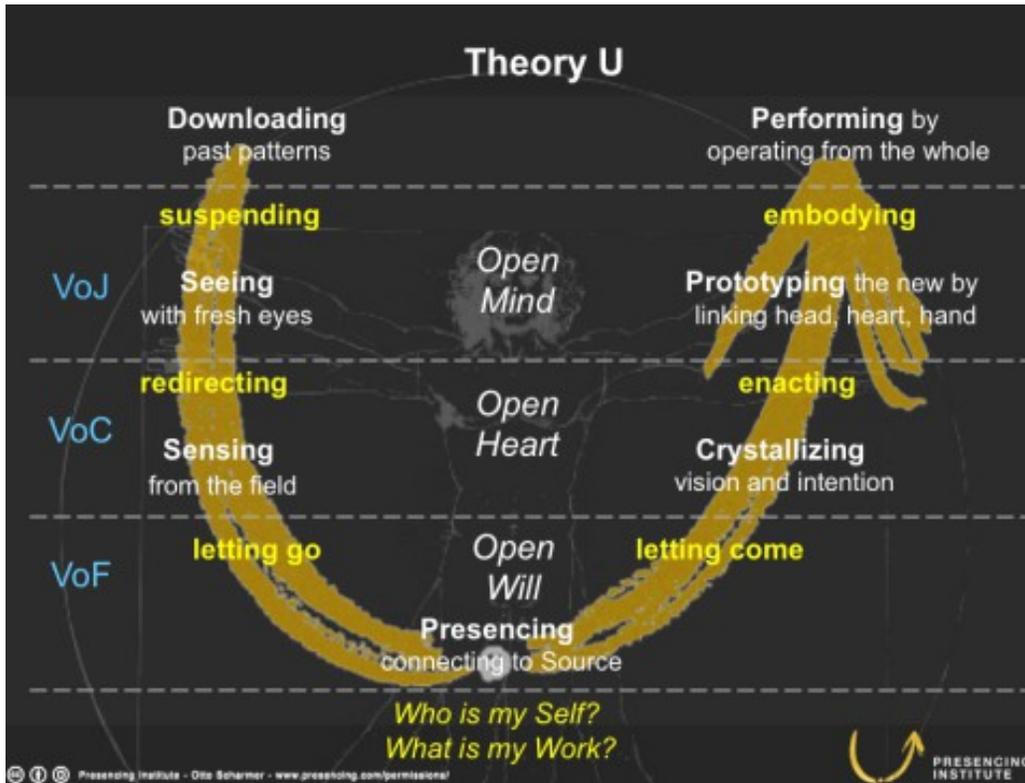


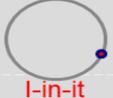
Figure 2: Theory U (Presencing Institute 2013). This work is licensed by the Presencing Institute - Otto Scharmer, www.presencing.com/permissions

The left side of U describes the journey towards the connection of the self (present self) and the Self (future self), which happens in the presencing state. The right side focuses on the action, which results from this. During going down the U the awareness extends, the perception and the place where the attention originates shift. Table 1 gives an overview about these perspectives. It shows the field structure of attention and how they manifest on different levels from the individual to the society.

Beside the normal space of social emergence – presencing – a space of social antiemergence exist called absencing. During absencing the current self shuts down its capability to relate to its highest future possibility. The relationship between presencing and absencing is dialectical and non-linear. It is possible to jump immediately into the space of absencing from every step of the U process (Scharmer 2009, 247f).

This is a problem, which is often faced in development cooperation and which demands an tremendous amount of caution and awareness from the facilitator. A dependency trap resulting from a development project for example is a form of absencing. It is a stuck state from which it is very energy intensive to establish again a connection to the future Self. Having this in mind the facilitator should use a principle of caution against which he checks his or her actions.

Table 1: Field Structure of Attention (Presencing Institute 2013). This work is licensed by the Presencing Institute - Otto Scharmer, www.presencing.com/permissions

Field: Structure Of Attention	Attentional action	Conversational action	Organizational action	Global action
 I-in-me	Listening 1: Downloading habits of thought	Downloading: Talking nice, politeness, rule-reenacting	Centralized: Machine bureaucracy	Hierarchy: Central plan
 I-in-it	Listening 2: Factual, object-focused	Debate: Talking tough, rule-revealing	Decentralized: Divisionalized	Market: Competition
 I-in-you	Listening 3: Empathic listening	Dialogue: Inquiry, rule-reflecting	Networked: Relational	Dialogue: (Mutual adjustment)
 I-in-now	Listening 4: Generative listening	Presencing: Collective creativity, flow rule-generating	Ecosystem: Ba	Collective Presence: Acting from the emerging Whole

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Merging ERI and Theory U: A first Attempt

The ERI framework and Theory U are dealing with the same phenomena. Both try to describe and enable change. Using AQAL (Wilber 2006 in AIZ 2013) and the logical levels by Dilts (1990 in AIZ 2013) to analyze them, reveals that they are operating in different quadrants and on different levels. Theory U focus on the internal side individual and collective and touches the values/beliefs, identity/mission, spirituality/connectedness level, therefore it leads to transformational change. ERI puts emphasize on the external, collective quadrant. It aims to build capacity and operates up to this level leading to incremental change. It is important to stress that both are maps through which the world can be perceived, but they are not the world itself. So they leave out certain information in setting their focus. Also one has to be clear about the level of application. ERI and Theory U can be used on a process level or as a tool in a certain process. Given there complementarity, they could be used to illuminate each others blind spot and to create a hybrid process which is able to capture innovation processes in a rural development context more holistic.

Figure 3 gives an idea, how such a process could look like. It shows the ERI framework with the phases of the U process inserted. The downloading phase is not included in the chart, because it is assumed that communities will be selected in which there are already some

individuals in the process of Seeing. Some of the phases of the U process can be easily matched with the steps of the ERI e.g. farmer experimentation circle and prototyping. The core of the Theory U (sensing – presencing – crystallizing) fits into the core of ERI, where normally is an empty space. ERI leaves out what happens inside the individual and the community, but what is fundamentally for the whole innovation process. Creativity and innovation is something which originates from within an individual or through interaction among individuals within a community. It might be triggered by an external factor, but it is an autopoietic behavior of the system.

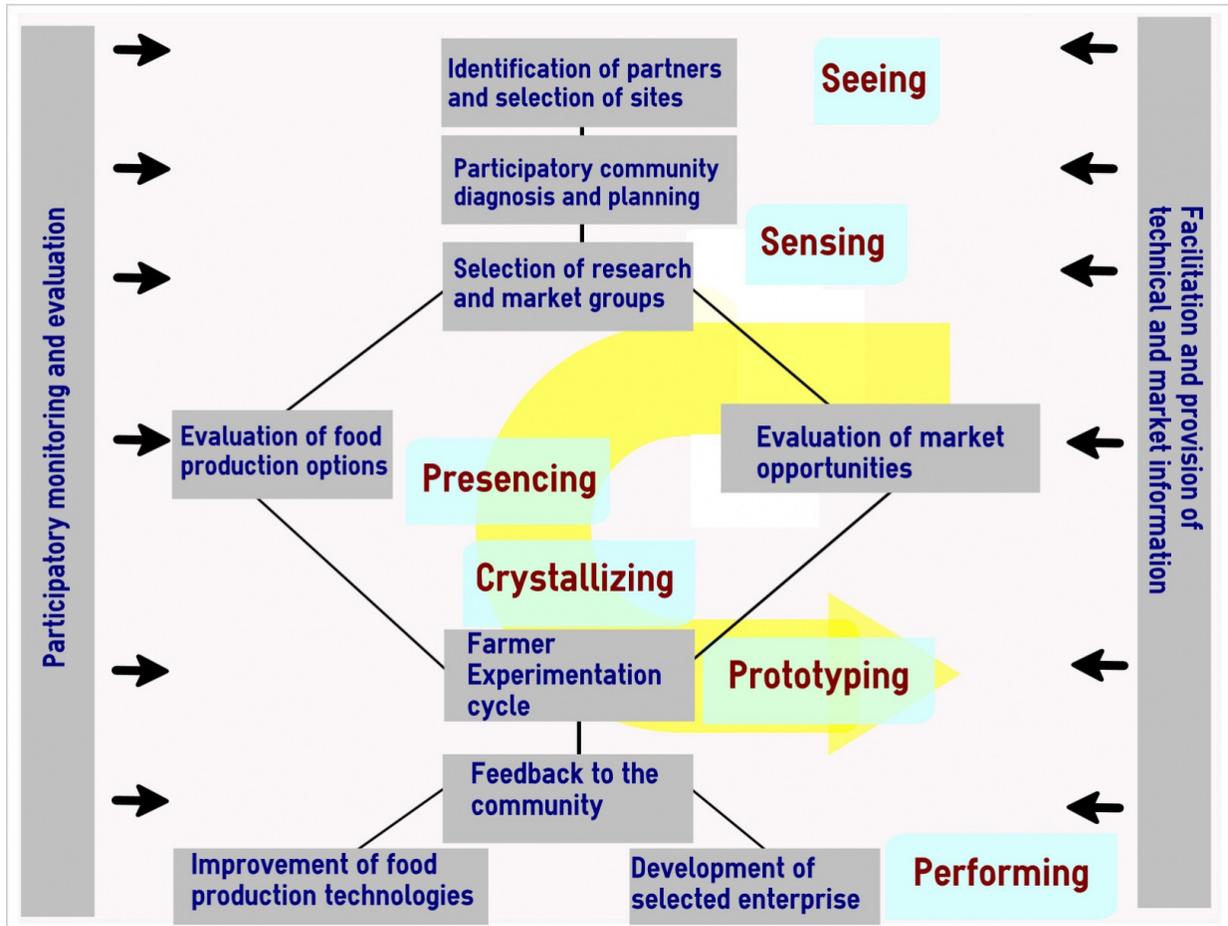


Figure 3: Integrating the U Process in the ERI framework (own illustration with elements from Scharmer (2009, 38) and Kaaria et al. (2005))

The Journey: Dancing with a Complex Adaptive System

Innovation is a process which occurs among stakeholders in a complex adaptive system. In the

following the idea of the ERI / Theory U approach will be explored further. Steps of an innovation journey will be described and several key concepts for the facilitation process will be highlighted. The term 'journey' captures the open end nature of an innovation process. When does this process ends? Even when the innovation is on the market, it can still be improved, adapted or can become an input to another innovation process.

(1) Downloading

Downloading describes the reproduction of “[...] existing patterns of behavior and thoughts”. During downloading we operate “[...] from within the closed boundaries of our own organization [...]”. We see only the mental constructs that we project onto the world” (Scharmer 2009, 121). A rural community in the phase of downloading is caught in their habitual patterns. This is fine as long these patterns match with their life conditions. In a ever changing world it is very likely that mismatches occur, which might result in a stuck state similar to a gamma trap described by Beck and Cowan (2005, s.p.). To overcome such a stuck state profound new ways of behavior and thought are needed.

(2) Seeing / Selection of the Site

“When we stop the habit of downloading, we move into the state of seeing. Our perception becomes more acute, and we become aware of the reality we are up against” (Scharmer 2009, 129). Individuals in the community become aware of the mismatch of their behavior and thought patterns with their live conditions. The wish for change occurs. People start to try out knew things. The attention shifts to the boundary between the observer and the observed. To do so judgments need to be suspended and the open mind accessed. (Scharmer 2009, 129ff). First signs of an emergent change occur. This signs make the community attractive for an development cooperation project and it is likely that a community will be selected, that shows them.

To engage with the positive emotional attractor (PEA) of the community from the early beginning of an cooperation seems important for its success. “[...] [O]nce caught in the pull of an attractor, a person’s mood, state, feelings, thoughts, and behavior cycle within a self-perpetuating loop. [...] Positive emotions have been shown to result in more altruistic, helpful, cooperative and conciliatory behavior (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). These cognitive events then

reinforce themselves and trigger positive emotions (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). This creates a positive feedback loop. In this way, a person is in the PEA until a tipping point shifts the person into the [negative emotional attractor (NEA)]” (Boyatzis 2011, 3). Boyatzis (2010, 3) sees the tension between the two attractors as a driver for change. One of the aspects of the whole facilitation process is also to balance them appropriate and pull either the PEA or the NEA to keep that balance.

(3) Sensing/ Participatory Community Diagnosis/ Participatory Market and Production Research

A properly designed participatory community diagnosis and market and production research can facilitate the transition from *seeing* to *sensing*. Sensing is the ability of the system to perceive itself. The “[...] perception begins to happen *from the whole field*. [...] It's about closing the feedback loop between people's experience of reality ('what the system is doing to us') and their sense of participation in the whole cycle of experience” (Scharmer 2009, 143). The participatory community diagnosis aims for that and it should be carried out with tools which enables the individuals to discover their participation in the system as a two-way relation – part taking and contributing. The Bohmian dialogue is a crucial tool to shift the perception from the boundary of the individual to the whole system (Bohm 2014). Part of the diagnosis is the creation of a vision, which functions as an orientation. The personal or shared vision is an important driver for change (Boyatzis and Akrivou 2006).

During this phase the wider context of the system is also explored. This is done via the participatory market and production research. The awareness of the interconnectedness with other systems and its embeddedness among the community is raised. During this phase the facilitator needs to carry out a stakeholder/system mapping which foster his/her understanding of the system. Using the livelihood framework (Scoones s.a.) in combination with a participatory constellation method seems beneficiary for the participant and the facilitator.

(4) Presencing / Evaluation of Production Options and Market

What to do with the data and information gained in the previous phase? To make them useful they need to be evaluated. The developed vision can function as a reference. But in this step

another important thing also happens and which is the core of the whole process. The field needs to be prepared for the emergent future. Scharmer (2009, 163ff) calls this *Presencing*. The perception starts to happen from the highest future possibility. There is a tremendous awareness of and connectedness to the emerging future. It is the creative core moment in the innovation journey. Presencing implies letting go of old intentions and open up to this future. It might also imply to let go the previous developed vision. The facilitator needs to provide a space in which the individual and collective can discover their Self. Nature can function as a mediator between the self and the Self. Contemplative practices seem crucial in this process. The community gained a lot of insights about their system and the outside world. Now this information needs to be processed and attached with meaning.

(5) Crystallizing

“Crystallizing means clarifying vision and intention from our highest future possibility” (Scharmer 2009, 192). The answer to the question “What do we want to do as a community?” – the idea of the innovation -- takes shape. Using artistic ways of expression like painting, pottery making or acting seems promising since it allows the expression of tacit knowledge, emotions and vague feelings. The so created art pieces can catalyze reflection.

(6) Prototyping / Farmer Experimentation Cycle

When the intention becomes clear enough an experimentation cycle can be entered. In this cycle first prototypes are created and evaluated. Prototyping means to “[...]explor[e] the future by doing” and it “[...] allows fast-cycle feedback learning and adaptation” (Scharmer 2009, 203). This allows to improve and adapt the innovation

(7) Performing / Development of selected Enterprises

Finally the innovation needs to be up-scaled. It need to be used and performed. *Performing* means that “[...] presencing embodies itself into everyday practices” (Scharmer 2009, 215). The innovation is institutionalized as an enterprise.

Conclusion

Using different analytical frameworks shows, that ERI and Theory U can be complementary and can combined extend the understanding of innovation processes in a rural development context. A first idea of such process has been given. For an application further research needs to be done on how such a process could look like in more detail and which tools could be used in which stage of it. The role of the facilitator in such a process is seen as crucial and tools for the facilitator to use on him/herself to be in the right mindset need also further inquiry. Finally such an approach needs to be tested and evaluated in a rural development context.

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