FOOD CONNECTION CHALLENGE

GHANA

Learnings from organizing a business challenge

The Food Connection Challenge (FCC) was launched in 2016 by BoP Innovation Center (BoPInc) and Crosswise Works (CWW) to find innovative business solutions to post-harvest losses in Ghana.

Between 35 and 40% of the total food produced in Ghana is lost due to inadequate harvest practices, storage or transportation facilities. With the support of the Food & Business Knowledge Platform, FCC has challenged five SME agribusinesses in Ghana to collaborate with Dutch companies offering suitable products and services. Student teams adapted the services and products offered by the Dutch companies to suit the Ghanaian business cases.

The FCC consisted of four steps as shown below:

Call for proposals to recruit Ghanian SMEs with post-harvest challenges → Matchmaking w Dutch companies' solutions → Recruit Dutch University students → Set-up business case for post-harvest solution for SMEs

This document highlights the most relevant learnings gathered throughout the challenge.

A challenge to generate ideas? Or to accelerate solutions?

The FCC proved to be a useful tool to identify and select and sharing local agribusiness SMEs. Twenty-five Ghanaian companies were eager to participate of which five were selected by an expert panel based. The ideas developed by students based on the solutions of the Dutch companies were well received. Several Ghanaian companies indicated that they were not aware of the suggested solutions, such as vacuumed storage in plastic bags.

However, to accelerate the business ideas and make them actionable, an acceleration phase would be needed with market validation activities and the development of full-fledged business plans. The business plans developed during the challenge were more solution-centred and technical or were not yet sophisticated enough to be applied.

CWW's experience with organizing this and other challenges shows that challenges often serve more as triggers for inspiring ideas, rather than for translating ideas into on-the-ground activities. Nevertheless, if quality and acceleration are paramount, the acceleration phase should be an important part of a business challenge from the beginning.

» Consider including a business acceleration phase in the proposal from the beginning.
» Think about funding and continuation after funding is finished.
» A simple challenge could already help to identify and select interesting (local) companies and inspire basic business ideas.

Dutch solutions for Ghanaian post-harvest losses?

One of the main goals of the FCC was to facilitate "matchmaking with impact" between Ghanaian and Dutch companies to reduce food losses while jointly pursuing business interest. However, the scale and scope of the five selected Ghanaian SMEs was perceived as too small by most of the Dutch companies FCC approached.

To ensure that matches between Dutch and Ghanaian companies were made, the team pre-selected and personally approached a limited number of Dutch companies, rather than launching an open call. With the focus on connecting Dutch and Ghanaian companies, local level solutions that might have created more impact were neglected.

As indicated by a participating student: "There was no specific need to look in the Netherlands for solar-powered cold storage facilities, as they could be also found locally".

» Depending on the goal of your challenge, also consider local solutions instead of only focussing on the use of Dutch technologies.
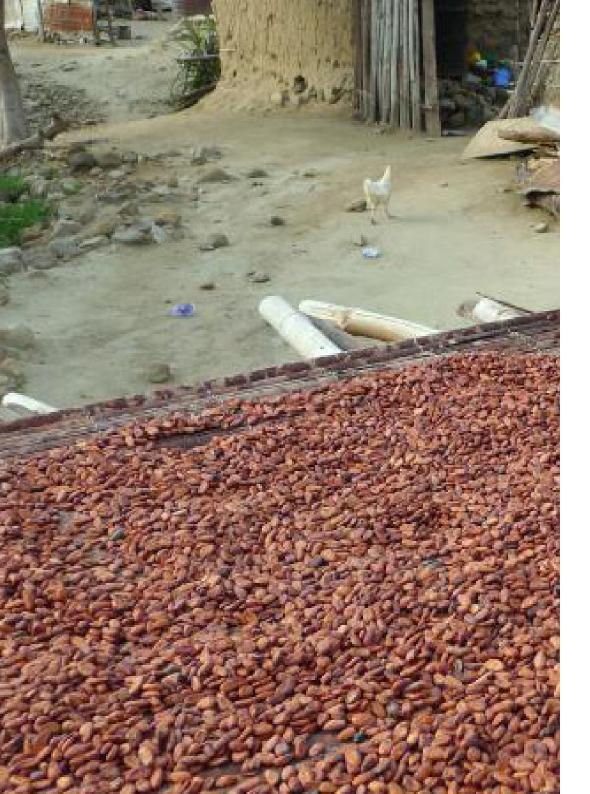
Can knowledge exchange be fostered through a challenge?

Knowledge exchange was incorporated as much as possible in the challenge and experts on post-harvest losses from organizations such as TNO, RVO, Wageningen University and Research and Postharvest Network spoke at events. Participants also learned about the Ghanaian economy and context and the funding opportunities to support business and development activities. Although not physically present in these events, the Ghanaian companies got access to the material and learned about different solutions for post-harvest losses. The Ghanaian companies indicated that especially this aspect of the challenge was much appreciated and several companies were thinking about setting up new business activities because of this inspiration.

However, the learning process could have been further leveraged if more possibilities for face-to-face interaction had been created, not only in the Netherlands, but also in Ghana.

» Plan and budget for events or trips that facilitate face to face interactions of all or parties involved.
» Facilitate learning processes in the country of implementation.
» Facilitate knowledge exchange by involving experts in public events, projects phases (e.g. selection procedures) and communication.
» Ensure that Universities and Schools of Applied Sciences are involved to enhance knowledge exchange.

After the challenge, what's next?

A business challenge is an intervention with a relatively short time span, but generates high expectations with participants and other stakeholders. It is therefore very important to think about the sustainability of the generated solutions and ensure that the actual implementation on the ground is embedded in the challenge design (at least for the winner).
With the FCC, we didn't take such a phase into account, which led to low incentives and commitment of companies, participants and funding organisations.

It is also important to take into account the issue of intellectual property. The challenge did not define any terms on intellectual property, creating a potential risk of conflicts among the parties that had cooperated in developing the solutions.

» Consider including an implementation phase in the proposal.
» If this is not possible: ensure potential future funders are involved in the challenge from the beginning, e.g. involve them in public events and main communications.
» Develop performance contracts or other measures concerning intellectual property.

What's in it for the partners involved in the challenge?

Given the diversity of partners taking part in challenges such as the FCC, it is important to ensure incentives to attract them and reward their participation. Seed capital for the winning companies to implement the suggested solutions, the opportunity for the students to travel to the country of implementation for research, or to receive study points for their participation in the challenge would have been great incentives.

Next to stimulating involvement, it would have also probably stimulated more creativity and have improved the quality of the final outcomes. This learning is also supported in CWW experiences in organizing Ondernemen zonder Grenzen challenge:

"If there is something to be won, it is not that difficult to attract participants. If you leave this out, you seem to reduce costs. But it can be more expensive to spend extra hours recruiting than allocating money for a prize."

» Budget and plan for incentives that can meet the interests of the different parties involved in a challenge

How to involve students?

The FCC aimed to involve students to provide a practical learning environment and to cut costs. However, since the timeframe of the challenge and the school calendar were not aligned, the process of recruiting and selecting students turned out to be more time-consuming and intensive than planned. Students' creativity and results would have been further stimulated if their engagement was better integrated in their curricular activities.

» When engaging students, make sure the challenge can be embedded in their study programs (i.e. receiving study points for involvement in challenge)

What are the expected effects on reduction of losses?

In developing the proposal for this challenge, we've linked this business challenge to the higher goal of decreasing post-harvest losses. Because of limited budget and short time span, this challenge did not involve a monitoring and evaluation system that could structurally measure such an impact and the underlying assumptions.

» From the start look very closely to the "measurability" of your activities.
» The measurability of challenges should not be overestimated, given their limited timespan.
» Where you do want to measure, try to stay as close as possible to existing impact measurement frameworks, such as DCED's standard for measuring private sector development.
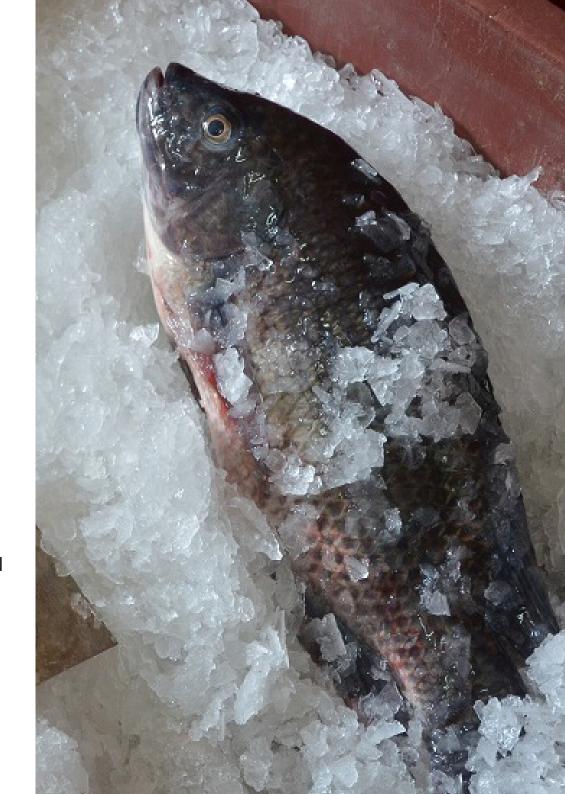
How to ensure focus?

FCC provided the right opportunity to pursue a wide set of goals, such as accelerating local SMEs, offering market opportunities for Dutch companies, developing locally embedded solutions for post-harvest losses and offering practical learning to students.

However, in the process the original idea of achieving all results in one challenge proved too ambitious. Some of these goals needed a more dedicated approach than foreseen (e.g. student involvement) or seemed hard to reach simultaneously (matchmaking between Ghanaian and Dutch companies' interests).
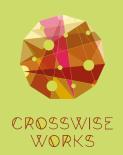
» Prioritise one goal in accordance with time and budget availability and set it aside from desired other or "sub-goals" and make these "nice-to-haves" instead of "must-haves".
» Do not underestimate the resources needed to reach sub-goals.

If you are interested in knowing more about how to organise a value for money challenge or more specifically about the Food Connection Challenge, please contact the organizers of the FCC Niek van Dijk (BoPInc) or Eva Rootmensen (Crosswise Works)

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