



The Innovation Niches approach in the ReSI-NoC project



In North Cameroon, several projects have been carried out over the years to promote technical and technological innovations that contribute to the sustainable development of agroforestry systems. At the same time, project promoters have regularly been found to be duplicating their efforts, and activities have been slowed down or stopped once the projects have ended.

The Innovation Niche (IN) approach highlighted in the ReSI-NoC project aims to strengthen the organisational capacities of project beneficiaries so that they have the capacity to sustain the initiative and the dynamics underway beyond the duration of the project. These lines present the concept in a simple way and the activities undertaken by this concept as part of the ReSI-NoC project.

What is an Innovation Niche?

An innovation niche is a space where a group of actors experiment technical, organisational or social innovations in order to solve or anticipate a common problem. It is a geographical space in which an innovation is born, developed, and co-constructed with different stakeholders who ensure its emergence and development. The stakeholders involved may be:

- Innovation promoters (the person who introduces the innovation, either an NGO, a project, a state agent (e.g. MINADER, MINEPIA) or a parastatal (e.g. sodecoton), etc.);
- Innovation support service providers who will provide specific support for the innovation (funding, specific inputs, specific equipment, networking, etc.).
- Beneficiaries who contribute to the design of the innovation so that it can be adapted and used (e.g. farmers, livestock breeders, women, mbororos, etc.).

One of the characteristics of INs is that they involve stakeholders working together to co-create or adapt the innovation and make it more relevant and easier to use. It is also a place where an existing innovation is strengthened to improve the conditions for deploying the innovation, for example by lobbying for recognition of the innovation by local or national authorities.

The innovation niche approach in the ReSI-NoC project

In the context of the ReSI-NoC project, a niche is the micro-economic level at which the innovative activity develops. We talk about niches because they are achievements on a localised scale, in a well-defined area or with a small group of players who interact to develop an innovation, also known as an innovation community. It's when the innovation is well developed and all its contours have been mastered that we think about disseminating it on a larger scale. Specifically, these are places where various support activities are carried out around an innovation by a variety of players with a view to improving people's living conditions.

Why was this concept implemented in the ReSI-NoC project?

Based on the concept of the innovation system, which enables us to understand how to support innovations on several scales, the ReSI-NoC project was able to diagnose the value of working on this innovation niche scale. One of the major findings of recent research into innovation niches is the need to strengthen their technical and, above all, organisational capacities. These capabilities relate to leadership, collective action and planning, These are what we call “soft skills”, which enable them to adapt to changing contexts. In the context of innovation niches, these skills are key, particularly in contexts where innovations are initiated as part of projects that may come to an end. These new skills enable the actors in the niches to adapt to the new situation and to seek solutions to maintain the innovation dynamic that has been initiated, for example by identifying new forms of financing. This approach argues in favour of considering investment in organisational capacity-building to be just as important as investment in technical capacity-building, if it is to be effective. That is, if the aim is to develop the innovations initiated beyond the project framework.

Methodological notice

An IN is a clearly identified and delimited place in which various stakeholders co-construct and develop an innovation, which may be specific to a sector or thematic area. From the outset, the project identified over sixty innovation niches of varying degrees of activity in Northern Cameroon. This identification was subject to strict criteria to ensure that these innovation niches: i) represented the diversity of innovative initiatives arising from projects in Northern Cameroon, ii) contributed to the sustainability of agroforestry systems and iii) had the potential to have a major impact on the SDGs (income, employment, social cohesion and equity, resilience to climate change and biodiversity protection). Using a rating scale of 1 to 5 (1 meaning not very significant impact and 5 very significant impact), the innovation niches were assessed by an internal group of experts. The NIs that scored 4 and 5 for the various dimensions of impact were retained. This is how the 8 niches supported by the ReSI-NoC project were identified and supported.

Innovation Niches identified by the ReSI-NoC project

The ReSI-NoC project identified 60 innovation niches in the northern region. Of these 60 niches, 12 were characterised and finally eight (8) were selected for support. According to the three intervention zones: near protected areas, around Garoua and in the cotton frontiers.

Innovation niches surrounding protected areas

- Structuring a shea butter pro-biodiversity value chain in Mbé municipality.
- Raising public awareness of natural resource and biodiversity management (environmental education) in Poli and Béka.
- Peaceful community management of transhumance around protected areas.
- Public awareness campaigns on the protection and management of natural resources and biodiversity.

Innovation niches selected around Garoua

- Community management of transhumance in the commune of Lagdo.
- Platform for the promotion of agroecological practices: Climate-smart agriculture in cotton-based production systems in the Poli and Pintchoumba localities.
- Securing agricultural land through contractualisation, an innovation niche identified in the commune of Lagdo.

Innovation niches selected in the cotton frontiers

- Advice on water and soil conservation in cotton production systems based on agroecology.



ReSI-NoC project activities within the Innovation Niches (INs)

The project aims to strengthen the niches by first identifying the capacity needs for innovation. The next step is to define the capacities to be strengthened and, finally, to organise the necessary training and support, create contacts and organise opportunities for exchange. The areas of collaboration between the ReSI-NoC project and the niche stakeholders were defined using a participative co-construction approach. These areas of collaboration include knowledge-sharing activities, diagnostics and interventions at niche level. For each area of collaboration, services may be provided by the ReSI-NoC project or by other development actors.

Ce travail comprend :

Sharing knowledge and experience

Enabling stakeholders in their collaboration to exchange intervention approaches, innovative techniques and documents on innovative practices, with the aim of improving the know-how of the various parties.

- General training on innovation (innovation trajectories, contribution to change in the northern region, multi-actors, etc.).
- Organisation of meetings to exchange experiences with other innovation niches.

Diagnostics

To identify the problem in a joint/participatory way in order to determine a stakeholder's reference situation before any intervention. The intervention will then be adapted to the stakeholder's actual context.

- Assessment of functional capacity-building needs, Problem tree.
- Network analysis.
- Diagnosis of the collective collaborative capabilities of niche operators.
- Diagnosis of niche resource potential (support services).
- Assessment of technical capacity-building needs.

Interventions at niche level

These are concrete actions or activities to be carried out in the innovation niches in line with the diagnosis carried out.

- Technical capacity building.
- Technical advisory support.
- Support for implementing the action plan through coaching activities.
- Support for facilitating the innovation process.

Key facts and milestones of ReSI-NoC's activities in innovation niches

Production of innovation niche identification sheets



Co-production of the innovation story and trajectory



Support to NIs in the development and gradual adaptation of their action plan (adaptation of the short, medium and long-term action horizon)



Production of a "problem tree" with niche actors



Training to strengthen the functional capacities of niche actors



Support for the implementation and monitoring of their short-term action plan



IN structuring; creation/confirmation of the office and development of an internal regulation document for innovation niches (optional)

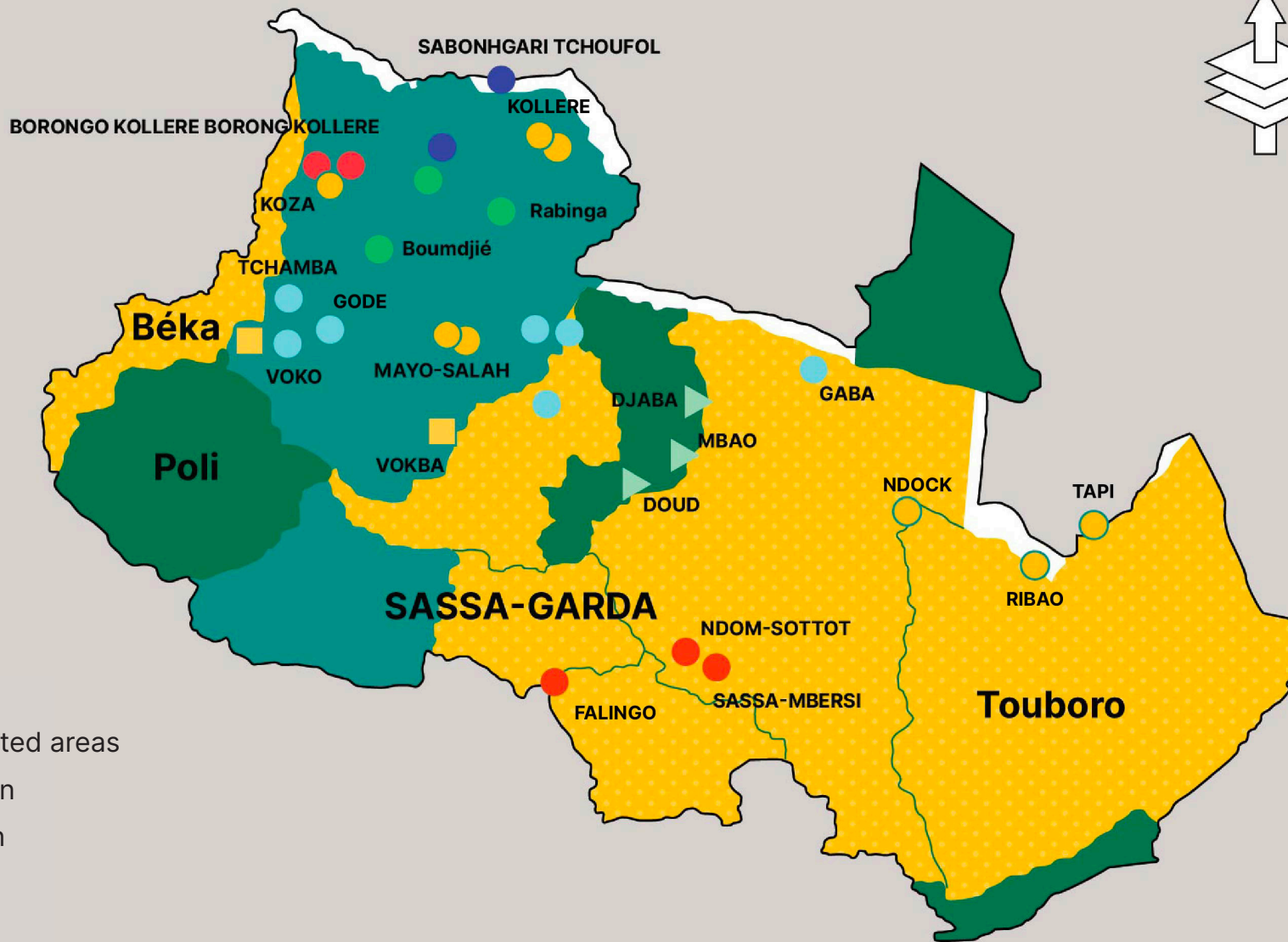
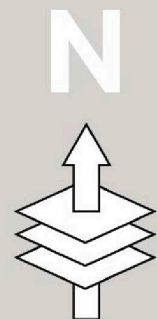
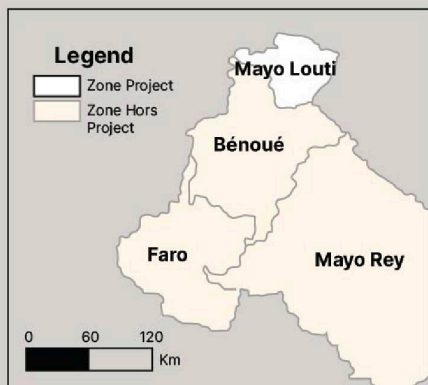
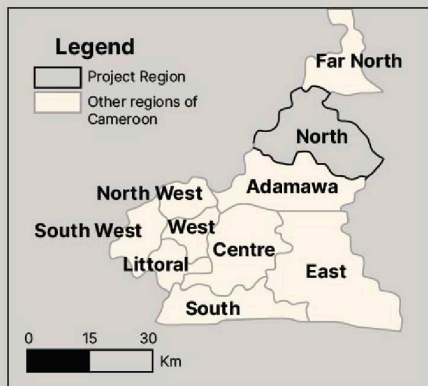


Development of training modules for board members on management aspects



Building the capacity of innovation niche members to implement and renew their medium- and long-term action plans.





Legend

- Climate-smart agriculture
- Co-management of protected areas
- Water and soil conservation
- Catchment basin approach
- Land tenure security
- Transhumance
- Environmental education
- Value chain - Non-timber forest products - Shea
- Protected areas



The ReSI-NoC project aims to strengthen economically profitable, ecologically sustainable and socially equitable agro-sylvo-pastoral innovation systems in the North Cameroon region. The project is funded by the European Union and implemented by ICRAF-CIFOR-CIRAD-IRAD.

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