



RAISING THE PROFILE OF AGRICULTURAL POLICY RESEARCH: NATIONAL ENGAGEMENT AS A PATHWAY TO CHANGE

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Throughout the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) Programme of the Future Agricultures Consortium, country research teams were encouraged to engage at district and national levels. This engagement was informed by the Pathways to Policy Impact Analysis process adopted by APRA, led by the Accompanied Learning, Relevance and Evidence team and the Information, Communication and Engagement (ICE)¹ team, which helped to identify key stakeholders for engagement and policy influence. Towards the end of APRA, during 2021, each country team held final district and national level events in order to share research findings and highlight policy implications.

What did APRA do?

Ethiopia

Most of the APRA Ethiopia engagement events were aligned and mainstreamed to government and stakeholder-organised events related to rice, including: (i) national rice stakeholders' platform meetings, jointly organised by the Ministry of Agriculture in collaboration with development partners' projects, mainly the Japanese International Cooperation Agency; (ii) annual national rice taskforce meetings where APRA Ethiopia provided its knowledge and expertise, especially during the revision of the National Rice Sector Development Strategy (2020–2030) and; (iii) validation workshops of the National Agricultural Investment Plans (NAIPs) (2021–2030), where the APRA evidence shared and presented contributed to ensuring the consideration of rice among the five priority commodities in Ethiopia.

The closing national event was organised to include the presence of key policymakers, including ministers, regional Ministry of Agriculture heads, university presidents, and director generals of agricultural research institutes. The event was supported by a comprehensive package of communication materials, which ensured the sharing of all evidence documented by APRA Ethiopia.

Tanzania

The APRA Tanzania researchers held various engagement events, which culminated in district-level meetings to share findings, as well as a national engagement event on 26 October 2021. The national event highlighted policy lessons from inclusive commercialisation in the rice value chain in Mngeta, Kilombero, and sunflower commercialisation in Singida region. Almost 40 participants attended, including the director of planning from the Ministry of Agriculture on behalf of the deputy permanent secretary, and members of parliament from the Iramba East constituency.

Nigeria

The Nigeria Work Stream 1 (WS1) team organised policy dialogues, as well as research result dissemination and community feedback sessions in four local government areas where the APRA study data had been collected. Attendees to these sessions (about 25 per location) were carefully selected to include stakeholders including traditional rulers, local government officials, state government officials, women leaders, medium-scale farmers, small-scale farmers and farmer association leaders. These representatives appreciated being included as they are often not provided with the opportunity to provide feedback and contribute to the policy formulation process. The sessions involved about two hours of lively focus group discussion (FGD) on policy implications and recommendations arising from the research findings. This proved to be a very effective approach in engaging all participants with the communities feeling connected with the issues raised by APRA's research. A lot of ideas from the FGDs helped frame key questions discussed at the subsequent national-level dialogue, which was held virtually.

Ghana

Engagement activities in Ghana were structured towards three levels of stakeholders for maximum impact. The first took place at the local (i.e., district) level, with the aim of taking APRA's findings to research participants in their communities. These events also brought the APRA study communities together with industrial oil palm companies, district-level government officials, and academics. One such event, held at the Sekondi-Takoradi Metropolitan Assembly, focused on possible actions to improve the livelihoods of smallholders, whilst boosting the productivity of the entire oil palm value chain.

The second category of engagements brought together farmer groups, policymakers, government officials, and development practitioners that were interested in APRA's work. At such meetings, the APRA team was able to share its outputs, including brochures and policy briefs, and invite participants to upcoming events.

The third category of events were at the national level, including a plenary session held at the University of Ghana on 3–4 November 2021, with larger groups of participants, including farmers and farmer groups, national-level policymakers, development practitioners, and academics. All events had a media presence for the purpose of disseminating the findings more widely.

1 The ICE team is made up of members of **WRENmedia** staff, including its Director.

Zimbabwe

The engagement activities in Zimbabwe were earmarked to begin at the initial stages of the research project. These were designed to create opportunities to share and agree on the research agenda at the start of the programme and, towards the end of APRA, to share and validate the research outcomes. In both instances, the stakeholder events were held at local and national levels, as the research findings had local as well as national practice and policy implications. Moreover, the research methods adopted in some instances were participatory in nature – and therefore entailed long periods of engagements with participants and local policymakers, providing opportunities to share knowledge and review implications on a continuous basis.

Two final engagement events were held: the first on 15 January 2022 in Mazowe District, which reported back to farmers' associations, and local government and government agencies in Mashonaland Central and Mazowe District. In addition, a second national level event was held on 30 January 2022 and involved policymakers, academics and researchers working on agricultural policy in Zimbabwe. The national event also involved stakeholders from the Ministry of Agriculture, farmers' organisations, the Tobacco Industry Marketing Board, the World Bank, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Additional meetings, in early March 2022, with FAO and FCDO, the European Union, United Nations Development Programme, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, among others, were arranged to share outcomes in further detail.

What worked well?

Ethiopia

'The timely support from the ICE team to get draft documents reviewed and published helped in the success of the comprehensive information that was available to be shared at the various APRA Ethiopia engagements events,' stated Dawit Alemu, APRA Ethiopia country lead.

Dawit is a well-recognised and respected national rice researcher/expert, and his involvement has been key to the success and impact of APRA's engagement in Ethiopia. His highly-regarded standing has been critical, as he has been able to leverage his network to bring together key stakeholders to really push forward discussions and the national agenda on rice. *'I am proudly able to report that our engagement was a key driver for rice to be considered among the five priority commodities in the NAIP, and in the agreement reached to develop a national rice flagship programme,'* he said.

Tanzania

'Engaging stakeholders at the beginning of APRA was very good, as they were then aware of what APRA was about when we started sharing findings,' stated Aida Isinka, APRA Tanzania country lead. *'Stakeholders' interest was higher later in the programme when we had tangible findings to deliver.'*

For sustainability of using APRA findings beyond the life of the programme, the Tanzania team opted to engage national advocacy groups (ANSAF – Agriculture Non-State Actors Forum, Rice Council of Tanzania) and some at the district level. *'We hope these institutions will find use from our findings even after the programme ends, and that they may also continue to engage researchers in their activities, tapping from the APRA experience,'* emphasised Aida.

Nigeria

The organisation of online e-Dialogues, which centred around panel discussions with key APRA representatives and expert commentators, helped to address the issue of resource constraints and some of the Nigeria team being based in the US and not able to fly to attend a physical event. ICE team assistance (external communications support) in helping to host these events through, for instance, raising online awareness, encouraging greater participation and formulating the titles, formats and posters for the dialogues, was critical to the success of the events.

'The panellists were carefully selected and represented a broad spectrum of the stakeholders in Nigeria's agricultural sector,' explained Adebayo Aromolaran, APRA Nigeria researcher. *'This was reflected in the quality of the discussions – particularly around the policy implications and recommendations raised, which were based on the APRA Nigeria WS1 research findings. The programme was attended by over 60 participants which we think is reasonable given the time of the year, close to the Christmas period, when many last-minute programmes were also taking place simultaneously.'*

Ghana

'The local-level engagement events were extremely useful, because these provided farmers from the study communities with the opportunity to provide feedback on research findings,' revealed Fred Dzanku, APRA Ghana country lead. *'The engagements also brought researchers in touch with officials with whom relationships have been developed beyond APRA.'*

Zimbabwe

The team's engagement with stakeholders from the outset of the programme ensured that APRA Zimbabwe's

research agenda was understood from the very beginning. In turn, this made it much easier for research outcomes to be shared with these actors, as they were ready to receive them. As a result, the team's local and national stakeholder meetings drew a large number of attendees, and involved vibrant exchanges of ideas.

What could have been improved?

Ethiopia

One of the key weaknesses observed by APRA Ethiopia was the limitation in making use of different media (print, radio, TV) for providing coverage of APRA evidence to a wider audience beyond the stakeholders invited to the engagement events. On reflection, the APRA Ethiopia team felt they did not provide due attention to media coverage for all events; it was only during the national closing event that the media were officially invited and good coverage was achieved.

Tanzania

Despite trying to engage stakeholders from the start, the Tanzania team reported that it proved difficult to engage high-level policymakers due to their busy schedules and the bureaucracy of reaching out to them. This may vary from one country to another but, in Tanzania, the team reported this as being particularly challenging. The high turnover rate of policymakers, especially political appointees (ministers, permanent secretaries, and even directors) also proved difficult, but buy-in from this level of policymaker ensured greater take-up of APRA findings.

The team also reported that virtual zoom meetings helped provide some continuation in engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, but emphasised that engagement is likely to be more impactful during face-to-face meetings.

Nigeria

The Nigeria WS1 team was not able to get the Federal Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development or his representative to attend the national policy dialogue due to his busy schedule. His Special Adviser was also unable to attend due to an unstable internet connection. The timing of national meetings is thus an important consideration and ensuring the availability of key players needs to be ascertained before a date is fixed. Physical meetings may also be preferable while internet challenges remain in Nigeria.

Ghana

While many elements were initiated from the very beginning of APRA, a local communications person was not included as part of the programme. The Ghana

team felt such an individual should have been appointed to facilitate engagements with farmers, farmer groups, policymakers, and development practitioners. One-off conversations alone are far from sufficient: and a local communications person could oversee the establishment of more periodic engagements, such as meetings with policymakers, rather than holding just one or two 'big' events. Instead, researchers were tasked with policy engagement activities; this was a daunting task as they had received no real training.

Zimbabwe

Researchers have a tendency to place their sole focus on fieldwork and writing research reports. While this approach is efficacious, it ultimately limits stakeholder engagement, which is critical if policy change is to occur once the research has been completed. The APRA Zimbabwe team recommended that, in future, the research team is trained in communications from the onset, or communication experts be recruited for local teams – as doing so would enhance stakeholder engagement and attract greater value from the research outputs.

Key lessons

- It is important to think carefully about the policy influencing strategy from the very beginning of a programme and remain flexible during its implementation as well as plan for policy influencing beyond the life of the programme.
- For successful and impactful engagement, it is important to have dedicated communication experts to provide support to research teams; it is recommended to have such communication expertise at national (or regional level) and not just at the overall secretariat level.
- Communication and engagement should not just happen at the end of the programme and only in big events; this process should be ongoing from the start to build up relationships and awareness of the research issues and outcomes. Opportunities for engagement should be taken up by participating in other organisation's events, meeting with individual stakeholders, as well as organising designated programme events.
- It is critical to keep in mind that communication and engagement should also occur at the district/state level, not just at national level, so that communities involved in the research study areas have an opportunity to provide feedback on research findings and to provide insights into required policy changes.

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