



ACCOMPANIED LEARNING: REFLECTIONS ON HOW ALRE ENHANCED APRA'S RELEVANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS

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CONTENTS

- Acknowledgment..... 3**
- Acronyms 4**
- Executive summary 5**
- 1 Introduction..... 8**
- 2 ALRE in the APRA programme..... 9**
- 3 Improving APRA relevance and effectiveness..... 11**
 - 3.1 Application and evolution of PIPA 11
 - 3.2 Optimising relevance: articulating APRA evidence with policy demand 16
- 4 Reflections on improving the quality, credibility, and independence of outcome reporting..... 19**
 - 4.1 Lessons and recommendations on outcome reporting 20
 - 4.2 ALRE insights on research evidence to policy linkages 20
- 5 Reflections on the added value of ALRE-ICE 22**
 - 5.1 Cost-benefit of ALRE-ICE..... 22
 - 5.2 Did ALRE contribute to the relevance and effectiveness of APRA? 22

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ACRONYMS

ACT	APRA Coordination Team
ALRE	Accompanied Learning for Relevance and Effectiveness
APRA	Agricultural Policy Research in Africa
DFID	UK Department for International Development
FAC	Future Agricultures Consortium
FCDO	UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office
ICE	Impact, Communications and Engagement team
MEL	monitoring, evaluation and learning
MSF	medium-scale farmer
PIPA	Participatory Impact Pathway Analysis
ToC	Theory of Change

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This case study explores the contribution claim that the ALRE (Accompanied Learning for Relevance and Effectiveness) approach contributed to stronger relevance and effectiveness of the six-year (2016–2022), Foreign, Commonwealth, & Development Office (FCDO)-funded Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) research programme of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC), through close coordination with its Impact, Communications, and Engagement (ICE) team. This report outlines the accompanied learning function of the ALRE team and how this ‘critical friend’ role supported APRA research teams in defining and reviewing their impact pathways, identifying and refining emerging evidence ‘nuggets’, and considering how to frame these insights to gain traction with specific policy debates and discourse.

At the end of the programme, the ALRE team produced a series of six *Contribution Case Studies*,¹ to identify and explain some of APRA’s key contributions to changes in thinking and policy around inclusive agricultural commercialisation policy and investments in sub-Saharan Africa. These case studies respond to ALRE’s objective of improving the independence, credibility, and quality of APRA – by providing robust analysis of how APRA has contributed to policy discourse; established a strong media presence; and expanded the knowledge base on inclusive agricultural commercialisation.

Throughout the APRA programme, the ALRE team worked in close coordination with the ICE team, as well as the APRA Coordination Team (ACT) and Directorate, to provide constant and consistent support to country teams. This included facilitation of planning and reflection processes; communication capacity development with ongoing emphasis on identifying key research messages; and identification of mechanisms and opportunities to engage with local, national, and regional policy processes. Through this ‘critical friend’ role, the ALRE-ICE teams established strong relationships of trust with APRA research teams, as well as a working knowledge of research processes. In turn, this enabled them to constantly challenge and probe teams with questions about how their evidence is relevant to policy, who it is of interest to, when it is of interest, and how it is best communicated. These interactions pushed researchers beyond their academic comfort zone and built their confidence to communicate their research, identify and interact with potential policy audiences, and continuously identify new opportunities for influencing and engaging; thus adding substantial value to the research investment.

Throughout the process, ALRE documented key lessons on research to policy linkages, which have been incorporated into the iterative support offered to country teams with value for future research to policy initiatives.

1 Whiteside, M. (2022) *Publishing Evidence: APRA’s Contribution to Knowledge on the Pathways to Inclusive Agricultural Commercialisation in Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 2. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17338>; Whiteside, M. (2022) *African Media Coverage: APRA’s Contribution to Understanding of Agricultural Change*. ALRE Working Paper 3. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17376>; Whiteside, M. (2022) *COVID-19: APRA’s Contribution to Understanding the Effects in Rural Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 4. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17377>; Clark, L. (2022) *Accompanied Learning: Reflections on How ALRE Enhanced APRA’s Relevance and Effectiveness*. ALRE Working Paper 5. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: [10.19088/APRA.2022.035](https://doi.org/10.19088/APRA.2022.035); Taylor, J. (2022) *Rice: APRA’s Contribution to Informing and Influencing Policy Debates Around Rice in East Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 6. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: [10.19088/APRA.2022.036](https://doi.org/10.19088/APRA.2022.036); Clark, L. (2022) *Informing the Debate on the Rice of Medium-Scale Farmers in Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 7. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: [10.19088/APRA.2022.039](https://doi.org/10.19088/APRA.2022.039).

Improving APRA relevance and effectiveness

Since 2019, the ALRE team has worked alongside APRA's research teams to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the research produced. This has been achieved by providing project teams with best practice advice – from existing knowledge on research to policy linkages – as well as reflecting on and documenting APRA's own experience and achievements. Their approach also included work to conduct and review Participatory Impact Policy Analysis (PIPA) to identify the audiences and processes that country teams needed to influence, and the potential alliances that could support change. The evolution of the PIPA process, with its strong focus on encouraging teams to consider pathways to outcome level changes, proved to be a powerful tool. For instance, it helped to clarify priorities and articulate communications and engagement strategies, by driving consideration of the 'Why?' 'What?' and 'How?', 'Why are we doing this research?', 'What is the message we want to convey?', and 'And how do we communicate it?'.

In the latter stages of the APRA programme, the ALRE-ICE team placed increasing emphasis on defining the emerging evidence 'nuggets' and articulate why this evidence might be important to specific policy process, programme, or framing. This prompted researchers to think about how their evidence offers potential solutions to specific policy questions, and to identify and refine the most relevant and insightful policy messages. This ongoing and iterative process required a shift in thinking for many researchers, who are typically unaccustomed to thinking ahead to policy messages whilst still processing and analysing data. Throughout the process, ALRE-ICE ensured APRA researchers stayed at the forefront of their own policy messages and engagement activities, in order to build a legacy of lasting capacity with the research teams.

A key element of ALRE – in optimising the relevance of APRA evidence to current and future debates on pathways to commercialisation of agriculture – was to explore key policy issues and priorities and identify the demand for research evidence amongst policy audiences across each APRA research region. This involved a two-phased approach to identify key policy issues both nationally and regionally: firstly, through a stakeholder survey, then through a series of national policy roundtables. The latter brought research teams and policy audiences together to listen to the key policy debate first-hand and identify opportunities for APRA researchers to engage in policy conversations.

Improving the quality, credibility, and independence of outcome reporting

The ALRE team's series of *Contribution Case Studies* were created to claim a middle ground between the monitoring and reporting of outputs produced and engagement events delivered, and more formal and costly impact assessments. They were designed to explore the causal linkages between APRA activities and outcomes and provide robust evidence of APRA's contribution to change through in-depth analysis that explains how and why APRA research contributed to specific shifts in policy or discourse.

Alongside this case study on the ALRE approach's contribution to APRA's relevance and effectiveness, additional case studies reflect on how the APRA-ICE work to strengthen media engagement has contributed to stronger communication of research findings and expanded the reach and influence of the key policy messages. Case studies also assess APRA's contribution to shift in rice policy in East Africa, as well as the evidence of how the programme has generated new nuance and understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on agricultural livelihoods, and the growth of medium-scale farmers across the continent. Finally, a case study on publications highlights APRA's vast legacy in the creation of new knowledge that has the potential to influence policy way beyond the life of the programme. ALRE has also revisited eight case studies from FAC, the precursor to the current APRA programme, to gain a deeper understanding of the legacy of those changes resulting from the research and generate insights on the sustainability of research investments and longer-term influence on policy processes.

In assessing the quality, credibility, and independence of APRA outcome reporting, the ALRE experience highlights the positive and negative aspects of an embedded accompanied learning function. There is a trade-off between the strong relationships of trust and knowledge with the independence and objectivity of reporting. However, through an ongoing process of constructive criticism, ALRE has delivered continuous reflection and support; based on first-hand experience of the challenges and constraints that teams have faced and responsiveness to emerging needs and opportunities.

Added value of ALRE

Part of ALRE's added value has been consistent emphasis on documenting learnings on the mechanisms and processes that strengthen research evidence to policy linkages, from within APRA and other relevant programmes. These lessons have produced a number of ALRE learning publications that have been continuously applied to sharpen APRA's own research to policy activities. These lessons have value for future research to policy initiatives and are synthesised and shared in the APRA Lessons Learnt report.² These insights have delivered continuous support to APRA research teams to develop innovative and engaging approaches to communicating research to diverse audiences. This process has moved APRA beyond technical research communications to also deliver stories from the field, develop dynamic relationships with national media, and bring together decision-makers to discuss the implications of APRA evidence to policy. This added value stems from ALRE-ICE teams' strong technical experience and understanding of the dynamics of agricultural commercialisation and research to policy linkages.

The evidence suggests that the ALRE-ICE investment enhanced the relevance of APRA evidence in a number of ways. This includes strengthening the quality and readability of APRA's vast publication legacy; delivering a consistent 'critical friend' function to encourage APRA teams to focus their research messages, identify their research audience, and consider how findings respond to policy opportunities; and supporting a programme culture in which research engagement and reflection and adaptation are embedded within programme strategy and decision-making.

ALRE-ICE also contributed to various dimensions of programme effectiveness. APRA far exceeded output and engagement milestones, and ALRE-ICE support built teams' capacity and confidence to communicate their research findings in non-technical language and using accessible formats, such as blogs and print media. The continuous emphasis on identifying and building relationships with evidence users who've potential to make or shape policy, has built awareness of the knowledge base generated by APRA and established relationships that will continue beyond the APRA programme. ALRE has been a cost-effective mechanism to maximise the research investment through continuous reflection and adaptation, as researchers have been able to periodically reflect on

how emerging messages will be received and used by potential policy audiences. This has built research teams' capacities to articulate and revise their impact pathways, to identify evidence users and listen to their needs, and to clearly communicate research findings. Ultimately, the process has provided a strong foundation for APRA's legacy, as research teams continue to apply these approaches and draw upon APRA's findings throughout their careers.

2 Clark, L. and Whiteside, M. (2022) *Lessons Learnt From Delivering the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) Programme*. ALRE Research Note 5. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: 10.19088/APRA.2022.037

1 INTRODUCTION



This case study is one in a series of six produced by APRA's ALRE team. It explores the contribution claim that the ALRE approach contributed to stronger relevance and effectiveness of APRA research, and outlines the accompanied learning support provided by the embedded ALRE team in close coordination with the ICE team. From 2019–2022, the two-person ALRE team acted in a 'critical friend' capacity, supporting APRA research teams in defining and reviewing their impact pathways, identifying and refining emerging evidence 'nuggets', and considering how to frame these insights to gain traction with specific policy debates and discourse. Throughout this process, the ALRE team has documented key lessons on research to policy linkages and incorporated this learning into the support offered to country teams.

As part of its methodological contribution to APRA, and broader thinking on delivering accompanied learning to support research programmes to influence policy, the ALRE team has produced a series of six '*Contribution Case Studies*' that aim to identify and explain some of APRA's key contributions to inclusive agricultural commercialisation policy and investments in sub-Saharan Africa. These case studies respond to ALRE's objective of improving the independence, credibility, and quality of outcome reporting by rigorously examining how APRA's research and influencing activities are contributing to changes in thinking and policy around inclusive agricultural commercialisation. They claim a middle ground between output reporting and more formal and costly impact assessments, to provide robust analysis of how APRA has contributed to policy discourse, established new influence pathways, and expanded the knowledge base on inclusive agricultural commercialisation. Case studies in this series assess APRA's contribution to shift in rice policy in East Africa, as well as the evidence of how the programme has generated new nuance and understanding of the effects of COVID-19 on agricultural livelihoods, and the growth of medium-scale farmers across the continent. The series also includes reflections on how APRA's media engagement contributed to stronger communication and expanded the reach and influence of the key policy messages, and how APRA publications leave a legacy

in the creation of new knowledge that has potential to influence policy way beyond the life of the programme.

ALRE was designed to be an embedded and iterative accompanied learning process that emphasised building relationships and supporting ongoing reflection to incorporate lessons directly into research teams' engagement planning and problem solving. This overview case study documents the processes that were delivered by the ALRE approach and reflects on their contribution to APRA's relevance and effectiveness. This case study also provides insights from which to explore the trade-offs in value for money, rigour, and effectiveness of investments in accompanied learning versus a traditional time-bound evaluation. The lessons learned from this innovative approach are documented to share reflections on what worked well and what could have been done differently, in order to inform investments in learning to support future research to policy initiatives.

2 ALRE IN THE APRA PROGRAMME

The APRA programme was a six-year (2016–2022), £7 million research initiative to produce high-quality evidence to inform policy and practice on future agricultural commercialisation options and investments in sub-Saharan Africa. APRA was structured around three focal regions of East, West, and Southern Africa, with primary research in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania and Zimbabwe, as well as additional studies in Kenya, Mozambique and Zambia. It aimed to examine how African farmers engage with commercial agriculture, from production to processing and marketing, and the effects these pathways have on different rural groups, particularly women and young people. APRA research explored the consequences of different types of market engagement on poor rural groups across a variety of contexts and commercialisation pathways – such as estates/plantations, outgrowers/contract farmers, and small/medium-scale independent farms – to provide new insights into the changing dynamics of agricultural commercialisation trajectories and their differential impacts on disadvantaged women and men.

The APRA programme, in close coordination with its principal funder, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (now part of the FCDO), identified the opportunity and need for an independent accompanied learning process to run alongside the existing APRA research and communication programme to deliver ALRE. The ALRE approach aimed to demonstrate how embedded learning and facilitation support could add value to research teams, deliver rigour in reporting on the outcomes and processes that support policy influence, and capture key lessons learnt to inform future research investments. It builds on the Developmental Evaluation³ thinking of utilisation-focussed evaluation, with the ALRE team occupying the middle ground between internal and external teams by aiming to combine the independence and rigour of an external evaluator with the innate project knowledge of an embedded monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) expert.

The design and sign-off of ALRE entailed a lengthy process of negotiation between the APRA Directorate

and DFID, which eventually outlined three key objectives for the ALRE team:

1. Informed and independent ‘critical friend’ input at key planning and reflection points during the five-year APRA programme **to improve the quality of the APRA programme’s overall outcomes by improving APRA’s relevance and effectiveness.**
2. Robust support to outcome tracing during and after APRA **to improve the independence and quality of outcome evidence reporting.**
3. Supporting APRA in process reflection and documentation **to improve the learning on research-evidence-policy linkages for future programme design.**

The negotiations meant that ALRE was not in place until early 2019; therefore, the team was not active during the research design phase and did not contribute to the identification of research questions and focus areas. Once approved, the ALRE team coordinated closely with the ICE team, with the advice and support of ACT and the Directorate.

ALRE support to country teams included the facilitation of planning and reflection processes; communication capacity development, with ongoing emphasis on identifying key research messages; and identifying mechanisms and opportunities to engage with local, national, and regional policy processes. Through this ‘critical friend’ role, the ALRE-ICE team established a strong understanding of the research processes and developed trust with the teams. Doing so enabled them to constantly challenge and probe teams with questions about how their evidence is relevant to policy, who it is of interest to, when it is of interest, and how it is best communicated. This also helped build the confidence of researchers and encourage them to move out of their academic comfort zone into communicating, alliance building, and influencing.

3 Patton, M.Q. (2010) *Developmental Evaluation Applying Complexity Concepts to Enhance Innovation and Use*. New York: Guilford Press.

ALRE was delivered by a team of two MEL experts, with support of a research officer. One MEL expert was an independent consultant, who previously led a large external evaluation commissioned by DFID of FAC covering six years of operation (2008–2013); and they brought this knowledge and understanding and their established relationships in the sector to the ALRE role. The other MEL expert and research officer were both internal to the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), the organisation responsible for delivering APRA. There was relative consistency in the ALRE team throughout the period, although there was a transfer of the MEL expert role within IDS in mid-2019 and a change research officer in 2021.

3 IMPROVING APRA RELEVANCE AND EFFECTIVENESS

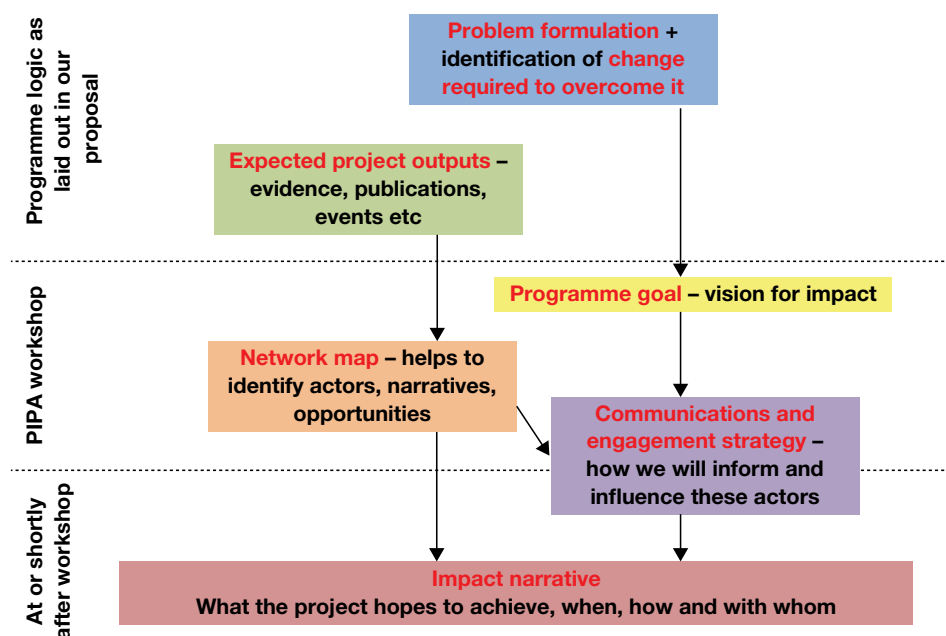
ALRE provided APRA project teams with best practice advice based on existing knowledge of research to policy linkages, as well as reflecting on and documenting APRA's own experience to work alongside teams to guarantee the relevance and effectiveness of the research produced. This included work with country teams to develop PIPA workshops at country and regional levels, helping teams develop their own outcome-oriented Theories of Change (ToC), and identifying audiences and processes they needed to influence and allies they needed to work with to achieve change. These PIPAs were revisited throughout the programme to continuously reflect on teams' impact pathways and the communication and engagement strategies being utilised to connect potential policy audiences to emerging research findings. This supporting role, undertaken by ALRE-ICE, ensured that

researchers themselves stayed at the forefront of their own engagement activities – and this has left a legacy of lasting capacity with the research teams. In the final months of APRA, the ALRE team also supported a reflection process to share findings and insights across teams on inclusive agricultural commercialisation. ALRE also delivered processes to identify demand for evidence amongst policy audiences, to support teams in refining and focusing their evidence 'nuggets' and continuously exploring potential strategies to engage with policy debates. This section outlines the key processes and lessons learnt from these activities.

3.1 Application and evolution of PIPA

PIPA was developed with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research⁴ to devise impact

Figure 1 Adapted version of PIPA



Source: Thompson, J. (2017) *APRA Inception Report and Implementation Plan for the UK Department of International Development*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies

4 Alvarez, S., Douthwaite, B., Thiele, G., Mackay, R., Cordoba, D. and Tehelen, K. (2010) 'Participatory Impact Pathways Analysis: A Practical Method for Project Planning and Evaluation', *Development in Practice* 20: 946-958. 10.2307/20787374. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237079470_Participatory_Impact_Pathways_Analysis_a_practical_method_for_project_planning_and_evaluation/citations

pathway logic models and network maps, to show the chains of outcomes that link outputs to eventual developmental impacts. This process starts with each team conducting a PIPA exercise and using network maps to identify potential policy audiences and key stakeholders, and clarify engagement objectives and strategies. In APRA, the PIPA process was modified, building on an approach developed under FAC (Figure 1) to provide a basis to support reflection and iteration amongst project teams as the research process and engagement strategies evolved. Each PIPA review was designed to challenge teams to identify key messages from their research, referred to as evidence ‘nuggets’, and reflect on how these emerging insights could inform engagement and communications activities. The evolution of the PIPA process throughout the APRA programme cycle, with its strong focus on encouraging teams to consider pathways to outcome level changes, proved to be a powerful tool in clarifying priorities and articulating communications and engagement strategies – by encouraging consideration of the ‘Why?’, ‘What?’, and ‘How?’, ‘Why are we doing this research?’, ‘What is the message we want to convey?’, and ‘And how do we communicate it?’.

3.1.1 PIPA evolution

The first round of PIPAs was conducted in 2017, prior to ALRE, in each APRA focal country (Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zimbabwe) and for each Work Stream team.⁵ These workshops brought together selected members of the APRA Regional Reference Group, involving a variety of experts and knowledgeable individuals representing key stakeholder groups, for each Regional Hub.⁶ The initial PIPA

workshops provided a baseline picture of how APRA’s ToC applied to each national context and helped ensure that the expected outputs and pathways to influence responded to the national reality of agricultural commercialisation policy and practice. Research teams each developed an impact narrative that outlined their desired changes and potential obstacles, along with identifying key stakeholder groups – which provided a starting point for developing engagement strategies that were periodically reviewed and revised through subsequent rounds of PIPA reflections.

In early 2019, the ALRE team conducted an in-person review in each country, which incorporated further reflections to connect PIPA to ToC thinking and support teams in focussing and refining their engagement strategies. As research processes matured, APRA’s annual reflection meetings in Ghana (2018) and Kenya (2019) provided spaces to work with teams to refine evidence ‘nuggets’ and craft policy recommendations. The COVID-19 pandemic restricted further in-person engagement of the ALRE team, and in-person mid-term PIPA reviews planned for 2020 were replaced with a series of virtual reflection meetings with country teams. The pandemic also had a substantial effect on the content of each team’s PIPA, which saw a rapid ‘pivot’ in APRA research to provide evidence of how COVID-19 was affecting agricultural livelihoods.⁷

In APRA’s final years, the ALRE team continued to challenge research teams to select emerging evidence ‘nuggets’ from their research and recognise how these could inform specific policy processes, programmes, or framing. This encouraged researchers to go beyond analysis of the context and problem, and process

5 APRA research was organised into 3 ‘Work Streams’ (WS1 – Panel Studies; WS2 – Longitudinal Studies; WS3 – Policy Studies), as well as a set of ‘Cross-Cutting Studies’ (related to commercialisation pathways and livelihood outcomes, including climate change; gross margins; living standards measurement; political economy and policy processes; poverty and asset accumulation; and social difference). Later, after the COVID-19 pandemic began, three comparative ‘COVID-19 Studies’ were added (An Evidence Review of Policy Interventions to Mitigate the Negative Effects of COVID-19 on Poverty, Agriculture and Food Security from Disease Outbreaks and Other Crises; A Multi-Phase Assessment of the Effects of COVID-19 on Food Systems and Rural Livelihoods in Africa; and Case Studies of the Impact of COVID-19 on Agricultural Value Chains in Africa).

6 APRA built on the Regional Hubs established under the DFID-funded FAC to coordinate regional policy outreach and engagement efforts - East Africa: Centre for African Bio-Entrepreneurship, Kenya (Coordinator: Hannington Odame); Southern Africa: Institute of Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, University of the Western Cape, South Africa (Coordinator: Cyriaque Hakizamana); and West Africa: University of Ghana (Coordinator: Joseph Yaro). The fourth and final Hub was based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, which hosted the APRA Directorate (CEO: John Thompson).

7 Whiteside, M. (2022) *COVID-19: APRA’s Contribution to Understanding the Effects in Rural Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 4. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17377>

to articulate relevant and insightful messages and potential solutions to specific policy questions. This approach was an ongoing and iterative process that required a shift in thinking for many of the researchers – who were focussed on processing and analysing their data – to think through how the emerging findings could be framed to respond to existing evidence demand and emerging opportunities supported by ALRE work (discussed in Section 3.2).

3.1.2 Reflections on ALRE's application of PIPA

'PIPA planning was a very important in crystallising practical and effective communication approaches aimed at influencing policy.'

'The PIPA planning helped us to have a tool that could guide our reflections, where we are doing well or lacking. We had also flagged the stakeholders to engage with, to ensure we were not only going to those that are receptive or welcoming or from our comfort zones.' Quotes from APRA researchers for the final APRA lesson learning workshop, April 2022

A key strength of APRA's PIPA application was its evolution alongside the programme teams, supporting them to adjust to shifts in the policy context and the shock of the global COVID-19 pandemic. ALRE-ICE provided a constant 'critical friend' role, which created discussion spaces and provided support to researchers in looking beyond their methods and data to consider the broader implications of their research, from very early in the process. Researchers found this both challenging and rewarding, and these repeat interactions undoubtedly supported new skills and thinking around research engagement across APRA's research teams.

'Researchers have a tendency to sit in silos doing research and writing, and not focussing on how research could impact policy beyond just writing up policy implications in your paper and producing policy briefs. Having the ALRE-ICE team emphasising the need to engage policymakers and make messages relevant and applicable was valuable.' Fred Dzanku, APRA Ghana Country Lead

Trust and strong working relationships between APRA teams with ALRE-ICE were essential to this 'critical friend' role, and building upon established relationships provided huge added value when face-to-face interactions between teams and ALRE-ICE staff were curtailed by COVID-19. The PIPA exercises represented a substantial percentage of ALRE time

investment and also required strong time investments from research teams; but these moments were valued as opportunities to step back from the day-to-day and think about how research connected to the broader policy context.

The PIPA approach evolved based upon its own learning and reflection, from an initial focus on identifying specific stakeholder groups to an increasing emphasis on the demand for evidence to inform key national/regional debates, and the channels through which APRA evidence could feed into these conversations. This was complemented by ALRE's work to identify evidence demand as important entry points to policy influence (discussed in Section 3.2) – which continuously reinforced the importance of building relationships with key stakeholders, in order to build awareness of APRA and articulate how and where APRA evidence could provide potential solutions to key policy issues.

Initial ideas at the start of ALRE to use the PIPA process to provide a baseline picture proved to be naïve and contradictory to ALRE's emphasis on iteration and reflection to support teams' continuous improvement. Rather than holding teams accountable to their initial planning documents, the PIPA process supported them in reflecting on their emerging insights and assessing the dynamic policy context to revisit and refine potential pathways to impact and update engagement plans. This experience challenges notions of rigour – usually associated with the impartial and objective assessment of an external evaluator – and questions whether it is, in fact, more rigorous to continuously reflect and revise plans and approaches to support relevance and engagement.

3.1.3 Support to synthesis of APRA evidence on pathways to commercialisation

In the final iteration of PIPAs in late 2021, the ALRE-ICE team convened a series of regional reflection meetings in a final effort to support researchers in identifying and articulating their findings on inclusive agricultural commercialisation and reflecting on the potential policy implications and audiences. These meetings returned to APRA's overarching ToC to improve understanding of approaches to enhance different pathways to commercialisation to support more inclusive growth and strengthened rural economies; in turn improving livelihoods, enhancing food and nutrition security, and empowering women and marginal people. These meetings provided a space to reflect across APRA regions and Work Streams, regarding who wins and who loses from different commercialisation pathways

to understand which groups (and how) are: ‘stepping up’ (accumulating and investing); ‘stepping out’ (diversifying and creating non-farm rural economic activity); ‘hanging in’ (simply surviving); or ‘dropping out’ (moving away or slipping into destitution).

This reflection and learning process also allowed for

countries and Work Streams in each region to discuss their learning and evidence on livelihood trajectories and inclusive agricultural commercialisation, so they could explore comparative insights from across different components of APRA research. A subsequent event brought researchers from across the three APRA

Box 1: Key reflections emerging from this ALRE synthesis event (October 2021):

Supporting women and youth to ‘step up’ and ‘step in’: Land access is a key constraint for women and youth to ‘step up’ or ‘step in’ to agriculture, and these groups remain underrepresented in the benefits of commercial agriculture. APRA research has generated a range of insights into how land tenure constraints reduce women’s likelihood to invest in tree crops in Nigeria,⁸ and how access to inputs in Tanzania is increasing women’s productivity but has not affected their market access.⁹ Insights highlight the need for policies and programmes to distinguish between female-headed households and to support women in negotiating within the family economy. There is a crucial role of empowerment and strengthening networks to support women and youth to identify non-farm economic opportunities, as well as the need to target social protection programmes for women who drop out of agricultural activity. Transport and technology are key enablers for youth, and inclusive training and education opportunities for young men and women should be a priority.

Impact of medium-scale farmers (MSFs) on inclusivity in agricultural commercialisation: APRA evidence sheds new light on the dynamic relationships between the growth of MSFs who are ‘stepping up/stepping in’, and the interactions and potential benefits and challenges to smallholder farmers. APRA has generated evidence that adds new levels of nuance to this dynamic in different countries.¹⁰ Evidence from Nigeria¹¹ shows how interactions between small and medium farmers around input purchase, training, and selling produce has the potential to support increased productivity and income and reduction in poverty incidence. This contrasts with data from Zimbabwe¹² – where the dynamic between labour and land creates an unfavourable relationship between medium-scale and smallholder farmers who rent their land and sell their labour to MSFs, with detrimental impacts on incomes and livelihoods. This is an emerging but essential research area with further work needed to explore how policies can promote beneficial models of interaction; mitigate the pressures on land and environment; promote inclusive access to infrastructure; and ensure social protection safety nets and non-farm employment opportunities for those who are squeezed out of agricultural production.

Relationship between diversification and resilience: APRA evidence shows that greater diversification of income leads to a stronger likelihood of ‘hanging in’ and increases resilience to crop failure; challenging initial assumptions that diversification limits farmers’ ability to benefit from commercialisation opportunities. APRA research explores different models of diversification and intensification across different categories of farmers and types of crop portfolios, including into non-farm employment across the APRA focus countries, with broad consensus on the significance of diversification into off-farm activities, particularly for women.

- 8 Aromolaran, A.B., Obayelu, A.E., Muyanga, M., Jayne, T. Adelaja, A., Awokuse, T., Ogunmola, O.O. and Osinowo, O.H. (2020) *Expanding Land Area under Commercial Tree Crop Plantation in Nigeria*. APRA Working Paper 41. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15669>
- 9 Jeckoniah, J., Moshia, D.B. and Boniface, G. (2020) *Does Rice Commercialisation Empower Women? Experience from Mngeta Division in Kilombero District, Tanzania*. APRA Working Paper 34. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15521>
- 10 Clark, L. (2022) *Informing the Debate on the Rice of Medium-Scale Farmers in Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 7. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: [10.19088/APRA.2022.039](https://doi.org/10.19088/APRA.2022.039)
- 11 Liverpool-Tasie, L.S.O., Nuhu, A.S., Awokuse, T., Jayne, T., Muyanga, M., Aromolaran, A. and Adelaja, A. (2020) *Spillover Effects of Medium-Scale Farms on Smallholder Behaviour and Welfare: Evidence from Nigeria*. APRA Working Paper 38. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15712>
- 12 Chitapi, T. and Shonhe, T. (2020) *Small is Beautiful? Policy Choices and Outcomes for Agrarian Change for Resettled Farmers in Mvurwi District*. APRA Working Paper 36. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15533>

regions together to discuss different perspectives on displacement and transition, along with the nature of policy support for those ‘stepping out’ to non-agricultural livelihoods or social protection measures to support people ‘hanging in’ or ‘dropping out’. These conversations also highlighted the evidence generated on those who are ‘stepping in’: often medium-scale investor farmers coming from an urban base, who were driving both innovation and social differentiation on the other; and thus adding a new dimension and insights to APRA’s ToC. The key reflections emerging from this synthesis event are summarised in Box 1.

The ALRE synthesis event was followed by a further series of regional planning meetings to define national engagement plans in the closing months of APRA. Despite these efforts, a lack of synthesis of an overarching message regarding inclusive commercialisation remains a weakness in APRA; the persistent emphasis on evidence ‘nuggets’ did not produce a ‘bar of gold’. Arguably, APRA’s complex design did not facilitate this high-level synthesis, and it was beyond the scope and purpose of ALRE to deliver this; particularly as the absence of ALRE in the design phase inhibited its potential to provide oversight and synthesis support in the latter stages of the programme. Moreover, the high levels of energy invested into the COVID-19 pivot, alongside pandemic-related travel restrictions on face-to-face meetings, also inhibited sensemaking or synthesis: constant delays and interruptions meaning researchers remained focussed on finalising research outputs until the very last days of APRA.

3.1.4 Lessons and recommendations on evolution of PIPA process

- **Lesson 1:** PIPA processes were valued by research teams, as these encouraged them to think about stakeholder engagement from early in the research process, and identify potential policy audiences and explore new engagement strategies, such as engagement with national media.¹³ Periodic reflections on the PIPA process provided space for researchers to step back from the day-to-day of data collection and analysis and reflect on the relevance of their emerging research ‘nuggets’ in a dynamic policy context.
- **Recommendation:** Create spaces for strong coordination between accompanied learning and communications teams, to ensure that pathways

to policy influence are reflected in engagement strategies and the design of research outputs. Create periodic spaces to reflect and revise to support the evolution of influence pathways.

- **Lesson 2:** The original PIPA plans were an important starting point, but research engagement is an ongoing process – with substantial evolution in national research teams’ thinking on policy influencing messages. This creates a trade-off between the use of PIPAs to identify research ‘nuggets’ and inform engagement plans versus holding teams accountable to initial PIPA plans. The pivot to COVID-19 was an extreme example of how impact pathways shift over six years and the importance of continuous reflection and adjustments to plans.
- **Recommendation:** Provide teams with ongoing support so they can reflect on their impact pathways via periodic reviews to promote flexibility of engagement strategies. In an adaptive process, teams should be held to account on their plans from iteration to iteration rather than using initial plans as a baseline.
- **Lesson 3:** ALRE has highlighted the value of investing in building skills and confidence to identify evidence ‘nuggets’, communicate research findings, and interact with key policy audiences and decision-makers. There will be different levels of experience and confidence in communicating research to policy audiences, and some researchers will require more support than others.
- **Recommendation:** Understand and respect researchers’ different starting points with regards to policy influence and be prepared to invest in building skills and capacity. Also be willing to work with researchers to demonstrate the added value of engaging policy audiences throughout the research process. Seek opportunities for teams to learn from each other’s experiences.
- **Lesson 4:** The APRA Regional Reference Groups played a useful role in initial PIPA meetings, but these groups could have been more active in supporting teams to strengthen relationships and leverage connections to access policymakers and other key stakeholders at national and regional levels.

13 Whiteside, M. (2022) *African Media Coverage: APRA’s Contribution to Understanding of Agricultural Change*. ALRE Working Paper 3. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17376>

- **Recommendation:** Provide reference and advisory groups with clear terms of reference, which outlines how they are able to contribute to impact pathways, as well as to support teams to establish policy connections and access policy spaces.
- **Lesson 5:** APRA's research design was complex and ambitious. The PIPA reflection processes focussed on specific country and Work Stream teams, but did not have scope to explore synergies emerging from the research to identify the overarching APRA-level policy messages on inclusive agricultural commercialisation.
- **Recommendation:** Integrate future ALRE processes earlier in the research design process to support large programmes to reflect across different Work Streams/research teams and draw out overarching messages on key research questions.

3.2 Optimising relevance: articulating APRA evidence with policy demand

A key element of ALRE's accompanied learning role was to optimise the relevance of APRA evidence to current and future debates on pathways to commercialisation of agriculture. Work to support teams to identify and refine their evidence was assisted by ALRE efforts in gathering data on the key policy issues and priorities to understand the evidence demand across each of the APRA research regions. This involved a two-phased approach to identify the key policy issues both nationally and regionally: firstly, through a stakeholder survey, and then via a series of national policy roundtables to bring research teams and policy audiences together. These roundtables allowed attendees to listen first-hand to the key policy priorities and identify opportunities to feed APRA evidence into policy debates and processes.

Close coordination between the ALRE and ICE teams encouraged research teams to reflect on how their work responded to the evidence demand identified, and to revisit their communications and engagement strategies to consider how to frame their findings in terms of the priorities and strategic interests of target audiences. APRA policy audiences were primarily national Ministries of Agriculture, Economy, and Finance members, along with district-level authorities; but also to be considered were groups such as the African Union Commission, the Regional Economic

Commissions, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, African Development Bank, and World Bank, and donor agencies – including (then) DFID, Japanese International Cooperation Agency, and United States Agency for International Development. The focus on listening to these audiences and building relationships through these conversations added an important dimension to ALRE's application of PIPA, by placing increasing emphasis on clearly articulating how research 'nuggets' respond to a specific policy framing or priority of the target audiences.

3.2.1 Stakeholder survey

The ALRE stakeholder survey¹⁴ captured the perspectives of key agricultural commercialisation stakeholders – from farmer organisations to policymakers – to gain a wide perspective of the dynamics of research demand across Africa and the policy issues related to inclusive agricultural commercialisation that require better-quality evidence. These insights were intended to support researchers to better frame their research around stakeholders' priority policy issues across the African continent. Data was collected between December 2019 and March 2020, from stakeholders working in a broad range of fields in the agricultural commercialisation sphere. This generated 166 responses from evenly across APRA's three focal regions, in response to two key questions on evidence demand:

- *What are the top five priority policy issues that require better-quality evidence and analysis in order for agricultural commercialisation to become more inclusive in your region of Africa?*
- *What are the most effective methods of communicating research to inform policymakers?*

Across all responses, the following were viewed as the highest priority issues requiring better quality evidence and analysis: improved markets for smallholder products; credit and financial services; the empowerment of youth and women in agriculture; and rural extension and advisory services. From the perspective of respondents in APRA focal regions, West Africa's priorities were aligned to the overall finding; while there was some variation in East Africa, where agro-input policies were higher priority and credit and financial services a lower priority than in other regions. Respondents from Southern Africa viewed land reform as a higher priority issue than other

14 Small, E. and Clark, L. (2020) *ALRE Stakeholder Survey Analysis*. ALRE Research Note 2. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15844>

regions. The survey also generated insights into the preferred methods of research communication across all regions: expert-led workshops and seminars, face-to-face briefings, commissioned technical reviews, and succinct policy briefs.

3.2.2 Policy roundtables

In March-April 2021, ALRE held a series of national policy roundtables that aimed to generate more qualitative insights into the evidence-use behaviours of potential policy audiences. These were conducted through a series of focus groups discussions on the key policy questions within the region and focus countries. This process was convened by ALRE-ICE, with support from the APRA regional coordinators, and connected researchers to policy audiences, so they could listen to their priorities first-hand and reflect on the relevance of APRA research in meeting their needs. These meetings aimed to broker a stronger demand-driven approach and identify opportunities to frame APRA results in speaking directly to specific policy questions. During each event, APRA researchers shared a high-level overview of key insights to inform the conversation about how to best to frame APRA findings to ensure their relevance to national policy processes. These conversations also invited suggestions around the most appropriate policy-influencing mechanisms and spaces, which resulted in a series of recommendations and invitations for APRA researchers to present their findings to existing policy groups. These reflections are shared in the ALRE report on evidence demand.¹⁵

'Following the roundtables, I think we need to immediately revise/recast our engagement plans and timings of approach to hone all "nuggets" and findings for eager audiences at study/country/regional and international levels.' Hannington Odame, East Africa Hub Coordinator

3.2.3 Support to policy briefs

ALRE provided support to APRA report authors to ensure that the influencing pathways identified in the PIPAs and reflections on research demand were integrated in APRA publications. APRA research teams typically wrote up their results in relatively long, supply-driven working papers, which were then subjected to internal and external review. The original expectation was that teams would summarise individual working

papers into a shorter four-page policy brief. ALRE worked directly with research teams to encourage them to develop policy briefs around demand, sometimes with a combination of research outputs brought together into an audience-focussed brief.

There was also agreement that, wherever possible, policy implications should be tested with stakeholders and key informants before finalising in a brief. ALRE also highlighted the importance of backing-up policy recommendations with evidence of positive experience elsewhere, and to be more tentative in recommendations when this wasn't possible; for example, proposing further research. This required significant input from the ICE and ALRE teams acting as 'critical friends', while achieving light touch additional quality assurance – which resulted in more demand-relevant policy briefs with robust recommendations.

'APRA has been a very huge learning experience for me. My capacity for research and writing has significantly grown. I am very grateful to all generous mentors in APRA Malawi and the wider APRA consortium.' Masautso Chimombo, APRA Early Career Researcher, Malawi

3.2.4 Reflections on ALRE work to identify evidence demand

ALRE work to identify evidence demand evolved and adapted based upon the perceived cost-benefit of time invested vs. value to research teams. The stakeholder survey delivered a respectable response for an online survey, with respondents divided equally across APRA's three focus regions. However, the high-level insights had limited utility considering the time taken to process the data. A change in the composition of the ALRE team at the point between survey design and implementation had implications for ownership of the survey and clarity on the vision of how it integrated into broader ALRE processes. Plans to validate and complement the quantitative insights from the survey with more qualitative reflections from a planned series of in-country focus groups had to be abandoned, due to the imposition of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Moreover, pandemic lockdowns created capacity constraints within the ALRE team, which delayed the data analysis. Meanwhile, data collected to understand the most influential factors in agricultural commercialisation across Africa were inconclusive, with only marginal differentiation between them. By the

15 Clark, L. and Taylor, J. (2022) *ALRE Report on Evidence Demand on Inclusive Agricultural Commercialisation in Africa*. ALRE Research Note 6. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: [10.19088/APRA.2022.038](https://doi.org/10.19088/APRA.2022.038)

time the Stakeholder Survey report¹⁶ was published later in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had caused a seismic shift in the policy context in terms of both the thematic priorities and engagement mechanisms, as well as a pivot in APRA research – thus limiting the utility of the findings.

The key insights were shared via an innovative 2 pager,¹⁷ which outlined the high-level findings in both a narrative and infographic format. This was distributed to stakeholders through APRA communication channels and discussed with teams as part of the PIPA review in November 2020, but received limited feedback. Whilst the survey provides a snapshot of thematic priorities and preferred engagement mechanisms prior to the COVID-19 crisis, it had limited value to APRA researchers in informing specific engagement plans. Reservations over the cost-benefit of a follow-up survey, originally planned for the final year of APRA, led to this being removed entirely from the ALRE work plan, in the context of the FCDO cuts to the APRA programme budget in 2021.

The series of virtual Policy Roundtables, conducted in early 2021, were much more strongly aligned with an accompanied learning approach. They supported APRA research teams in hearing policy and decision-makers priorities first-hand, and allowed them to gain a more nuanced understanding of the national policy landscape. As well as discussing key issues, the conversations also identified concrete engagement avenues and generated invitations for APRA teams to connect with policy conversations; although it is unclear how many invitations led to follow-up engagements. In future initiatives, it would be desirable to hold similar policy roundtables periodically throughout the programme cycle, as a mechanism to build relationships and connect researchers to policy conversations and spaces; and, ideally, this would include face-to-face events.

3.2.5 Lessons and recommendations on evidence demand

- **Lesson 1:** APRA research design, methods, and scope were finalised before ALRE was commissioned, so ALRE work to identify policy demand had limited opportunity to shift focus, particularly in terms of longitudinal studies. There is a balance to be struck between the role of research

in providing blue sky thinking to explain evolving contexts and anticipate new drivers of change, and ensuring that research is designed to ensure relevance and utility in current policy contexts.

- **Recommendation:** The policy environment is dynamic, so identifying key priorities and debates should be an iterative process that starts in the research design phase, with follow-ups at key moments in response to the research cycle and/or shifting policy contexts. Place emphasis on using these conversations to build relationships with potential policy audiences early in the process, and enhance their understanding of and engagement with research processes and ownership of eventual outputs and key messages.
- **Lesson 2:** Building understanding of evidence demand required finding the balance between breadth and depth and qualitative and quantitative insights. The stakeholder survey provided an overview of key trends across regions, but provided few actionable insights. Focus group discussions provided strong indications of national priorities and processes, and generated concrete suggestions for engagement opportunities.
- **Recommendation:** Be clear on how to combine and follow-up on qualitative and quantitative data regarding evidence demand, to maximise the cost-benefit of investment in both types of analysis. Validating data with policy audiences can add depth and initiate conversations that establish new connections.
- **Lesson 3:** There are strengths and weaknesses to virtual Policy Roundtables. Virtual spaces can bring decision-makers from the national and district levels together and enable discussions of their different perspectives. However, it is much harder to establish and sustain meaningful relationships with key actors to then follow through on policy implementation.
- **Recommendation:** Seek a balance between virtual and face-to-face interactions where feasible. Identify opportunities for follow-up or repeat engagements with key stakeholders, in order to build relationships with those who have the capacity, position, and incentive to implement policy change.

16 Small, E. and Clark, L. (2020) *ALRE Stakeholder Survey Analysis*. ALRE Research Note 2. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15844>

17 Small, E. and Clark, L. (2020) *ALRE Stakeholder Survey Analysis Key Findings*. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15843>

4 REFLECTIONS ON IMPROVING THE QUALITY, CREDIBILITY, AND INDEPENDENCE OF OUTCOME REPORTING

ALRE's second objective was to deliver robust support to outcome tracing during and after APRA, to improve the independence and quality of outcome evidence reporting. This has been delivered through the series of 'Contribution Case Studies', designed to claim a stronger middle ground between the monitoring and reporting of outputs produced and engagement events delivered, and more formal and costly impact assessments – which are not appropriate or feasible in some cases. These case studies build upon ALRE's work to capture the lessons learnt from research to policy linkages,¹⁸ which highlights that policy change is neither immediate nor linear. This, therefore, creates a challenge in identifying specific shifts within the timeframe of research programmes, when final research outputs are still in production. The *Contribution Case Studies* were designed to explore the causal linkages between APRA activities and outcomes, and to assess the evidence supporting each contribution claim. The timing of the case studies was a critical factor in their scope and ambition, having been produced during the final months of APRA when many final outputs were also still in production and engagement events underway. This limited the number of examples of policy influence

available, and resulted in a stronger focus on how outputs and processes have contributed to debates, thinking, and expanding the knowledge base – leading to a series of contributions case studies that explore different dimensions of research to policy processes.

The rice case study¹⁹ goes furthest in explaining how and why APRA research contributed to specific shifts in policy or discourse across East Africa, Ethiopia, and Tanzania. Case studies on APRA's work on the effects of COVID-19 on rural Africa²⁰ and on the growth of MSFs across the continent²¹ share examples of how APRA research has provided new evidence to inform and nuance debate on an emerging phenomenon. The case studies on APRA's work with regards to engaging with the media²² and the substantial coverage this generated, and reflections on the knowledge legacy on pathways to inclusive agricultural commercialisation,²³ both highlight knowledge creation and communication as important dimensions of APRA's contribution to policy thinking. This final case study, on ALRE's contribution to APRA's relevance and effectiveness, also shares key insights for future research to policy initiatives.

- 18 Clark, L. (2020) *The Diamond of Influence: A Model for Exploring Behaviour in Research to Policy Linkages*. ALRE Research Note 1. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15785>; Whiteside, M. (2021) *Research to Policy Influencing: Lessons from APRA on Efficiency, Effectiveness and Sustainability*. ALRE Research Note 4. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16742>; Whiteside, M. (2021) *From Field Research to Policy Change: Lessons from FAC and APRA*. ALRE Working Paper 1. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16777>
- 19 Taylor, J. (2022) *Rice: APRA's Contribution to Informing and Influencing Policy Debates Around Rice in East Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 6. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: 10.19088/APRA.2022.036
- 20 Whiteside, M. (2022) *COVID-19: APRA's Contribution to Understanding the Effects in Rural Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 4. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17377>
- 21 Clark, L. (2022) *Informing the Debate on the Rice of Medium-Scale Farmers in Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 7. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: 10.19088/APRA.2022.039
- 22 Whiteside, M. (2022) *African Media Coverage: APRA's Contribution to Understanding of Agricultural Change*. ALRE Working Paper 3. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17376>
- 23 Whiteside, M. (2022) *Publishing Evidence: APRA's Contribution to Knowledge on the Pathways to Inclusive Agricultural Commercialisation in Africa*. ALRE Working Paper 2. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17338>

ALRE invested significant time in revisiting eight case studies from FAC,²⁴ a precursor programme to APRA, to gain a deeper understanding of the legacy of this research and generate insights regarding the sustainability of research investments and longer-term influence on policy processes. To this end, the ALRE team conducted a combination of literature reviews and key informant interviews, to understand what had happened over the past seven years (2014–2021) and ascertain the probable contribution of FAC to shifts in policy, as well as any other relevant causal factors. The revisited case studies produced some significant learnings in relation to policy engagement, which was then fed back to APRA.²⁵

This work, to improve the quality and credibility of outcome reporting, has highlighted the importance of time frames within challenges when trying to avoid identifying outcomes either too soon or too late. Identifying contributions of research to policy requires a longer-term perspective than the programme cycle, but this needs to be balanced with the practical challenges of identifying key stakeholders and policy people, and prompting them to remember potential causal linkages or events years after research programmes have finished. The experience from FAC, of a final evaluation soon after the end of programme and a re-visit six years later, would suggest that case studies of policy influence two to three years after the research results have been communicated might be the most appropriate interval.

4.1 Lessons and recommendations on outcome reporting

- **Lesson 1:** *Sequence and timing of accompanied learning, research planning, research, evidence synthesis, publication, communication, and policy outcome analysis is important. While the different facets of research need to be accompanied throughout by communication and accompanied learning, there is also a need for communications to continue after the research is complete and for the final analysis of policy outcomes to follow on later still.*
- **Recommendation:** *Programme timetables should allow for communication to continue*

beyond the research stage and for the analysis of and learning from policy change to take place later still.

- **Lesson 2:** *It can be a challenge to distinguish between processes and outcomes, particularly whilst research and engagement activities are still being delivered. It is important to manage expectations and ambitions and capture progress towards micro-outcomes, such as building connections or building media capacity, as these may lead to more substantial outcomes over time.*
- **Recommendation:** *Create appropriate communication channels to capture national teams' engagement events, secure media coverage, and influence work with advisory groups and policy forums to monitor process as well as progress. Build in spaces to support teams to reflect on how engagement activities are contributing to micro-outcomes, such as informing or promoting a debate, shifting discourse, or strengthening relationships, as these are important pathways to policy influence.*
- **Lesson 3:** *There is value in revisiting programme outcomes after they have closed, but this has a time limitation in terms of identifying key informants and guaranteeing their recollection of events and processes.*
- **Recommendations:** *Revisiting programme outcomes should happen within three years of programme closure to ensure access to key informants and accurate recollection of influence pathways.*

4.2 ALRE insights on research evidence to policy linkages

Throughout the ALRE process, there has been a consistent emphasis on documenting learning, both from within APRA and from other relevant programmes, on the mechanisms and processes that strengthen research to policy linkages. ALRE has produced a number of publications that summarise the lessons that have been applied to continuously sharpen APRA's research to policy activities. The lessons draw

24 Whiteside, M. (2021) *From Field Research to Policy Change: Lessons from FAC and APRA*. ALRE Working Paper 1. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16777>

25 Whiteside, M. (2021) *From Field Research to Policy Change: Lessons from FAC and APRA*. ALRE Working Paper 1. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16777>

from the strong legacy of FAC and ALRE's work to revisit FAC outcomes, to take a longer-term view of how this research influenced policy five years after programme completion. Further insights that emerged from ALRE facilitated reflections on efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability²⁶ – which defined **efficiency** as delivering research in an economic and timely way; **effectiveness** as the adoption of research evidence to achieve changes in the narrative, policy, or practice; and **sustainability** as the extent to which the net benefits of the intervention will continue (also understood as the 'programme legacy'). In reality, these outcomes are mutually reinforcing.

The ALRE team also developed its own conceptual model, the Diamond of Influence,²⁷ which draws upon the Capabilities, Opportunities, and Motivations of Behaviour Change (COM-B) model. This was developed through Michie et al.'s (2014)²⁸ work on the 'Behaviour Change Wheel', designed to explore the relationships between evidence-based practice and behaviour change in the public health sector. The framework was developed to explore how COM-B concepts support thinking around relevance and effectiveness of APRA research. In turn, this defined capabilities as the knowledge and skills of the APRA's evidence generation and investment in research capacity; defined opportunities as the broader policy context and external factors that support research application in response to emerging issues, debates, and policy processes; and defined motivation as the internal incentives of policymakers, with strong links to building ownership of evidence and identifying policy champions with incentives to act upon research evidence. The focus on behaviour change acknowledges that all policy shifts are the result of changing evidence-use behaviours among key decision-makers and influential stakeholder groups, in terms of how they respond to or act upon evidence. At the centre of the model was stakeholder engagement; which highlights the importance of people and social processes in building trust and driving behavioural

and social change. This working paper is now core reading material of the bi-annual IDS Shaping Policy with Evidence short course.

A synthesis of these lessons learnt on research to policy linkages is available in the APRA Lessons Learnt report.²⁹

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- 26 Whiteside, M. (2021) *Research to Policy Influencing: Lessons from APRA on Efficiency, Effectiveness and Sustainability*. ALRE Research Note 4. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16742>
- 27 Clark, L. (2020) *The Diamond of Influence: A Model for Exploring Behaviour in Research to Policy Linkages*. ALRE Research Note 1. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/15785>
- 28 Michie, S., Atkins, L. and West, R. (2014) *The Behaviour Change Wheel: A Guide to Designing Interventions*. London: Silverback Publishing.
- 29 Clark, L. and Whiteside, M. (2022) *Lessons Learnt From Delivering the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) Programme*. ALRE Research Note 5. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. DOI: 10.19088/APRA.2022.037

5 REFLECTIONS ON THE ADDED VALUE OF ALRE-ICE

5.1 Cost-benefit of ALRE-ICE

ALRE was approved in early 2019, with a budget of just under £200,000 (of which 20 per cent approx. £40,000 came from APRA's existing budget). This would fund 285 days of accompanied learning support from two MEL professionals, over three years (2019–2021). On approval, the budget was divided 45:55, with 45 per cent to be spent on the 'critical friend' role to deliver PIPA and ongoing reflection support, and to review and document lessons for research to policy change initiatives; and 55 per cent to be spent on reviewing relevance and impact work to assess evidence demand and deliver the contribution case studies. Over the course of APRA, these two functions became increasingly merged. In August 2020, APRA negotiated a no-cost extension due to the disruption resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. In this amendment, the ALRE budget was approximately £175,000 (including travel budget), with 22 per cent of these funds from the APRA-ICE budget line.

To reflect on the value for money of this investment, these figures should be compared with standard evaluation budgets for mid-term and end-line evaluations, plus the cost of MEL staff. Following FCDO budget cuts in late 2021, APRA's evaluation budget was cut, so there are no figures available on this amount. Instead, to provide a comparison, a 2020 performance evaluation,³⁰ led by a member of the ALRE team for FCDO on a programme of similar size and duration, was budgeted at approx. £100,000 for a six-month contract – after the closure of FCDO funding with limited potential to action recommendations. The ALRE experience challenges the notion of rigour as solely a function of an external evaluator and suggests that having a constant 'critical friend' adds tangible value to supporting continuous reflection adjustments and improvements.

The benefit of the investment in ALRE should be considered against its relative benefit, in terms of its contribution to APRA's relevance and effectiveness

and consideration of how this delivered value for money for FCDO. There is no counterfactual of APRA relevance and effectiveness, nor is it possible to assess the investment in ALRE without considering ICE. Moreover, ALRE provided an additional channel to ensure the strategic input of FAC into APRA and continued to build upon these previous investments and existing knowledge and networks.

These investments have undoubtedly enhanced the quality and readability of APRA's vast publication legacy; established connections between researchers and journalists that have built capacity to communicate research by both groups; delivered a consistent 'critical friend' function to encourage APRA teams to identify their research audience and consider how findings respond to policy opportunities; and established a programme culture in which research engagement and reflection and adaptation are embedded within programme strategy and decision-making.

5.2 Did ALRE contribute to the relevance and effectiveness of APRA?

Through both its evident influence on programme performance and the positive response of APRA coordinators, researchers, and partners to its interventions, it can be concluded that ALRE has been an innovative model of embedded accompanying learning support that increased the relevance and effectiveness of APRA. A key factor in the success of the ALRE model was the strong and constant coordination between the ALRE and ICE teams, overseen by the APRA Directorate. This collaboration placed a consistent emphasis on delivering processes, as much as products, by establishing strong relationships of trust with research teams – to support them in delivering quality outputs and holding effective engagement activities to build relationships with relevant stakeholder groups. The ALRE-ICE teams brought together their previous experience and strong understanding of the dynamics of agricultural

30 Clark, L., Higdon, G.L., Roberts, T., Barnett, I., Hernandez, K. and Martin, P.P. (2020) *Performance Evaluation of the Global Open Data for Agriculture and Nutrition Programme*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies. https://iati.fcdo.gov.uk/iati_documents/56313536.pdf

commercialisation and research to policy linkages support teams, to share innovative and engaging approaches to communicate research to diverse audiences. In doing so, APRA was able to move beyond technical research communications and deliver stories from the field, build dynamic relationships with national media, and bring together decision-makers to discuss the implications of APRA evidence on policy.

The ALRE team invested significant energy in supporting the relevance of research through work documenting evidence demand and placing emphasis on framing research findings. That said, ALRE's capacity to increase the relevance of APRA's research was limited by its modest scope and resources and short duration. As such, future research to policy programmes should consider commissioning an ALRE function earlier in the design process and incorporating it into the overseeing of activities to capture policy priorities whilst still possible, to focus and inform research questions, sites, and methods.

There are various dimensions to effectiveness. ALRE-ICE emphasis has undoubtedly contributed to building research teams' capacity in identifying and delivering more effective impact pathways. The continuous emphasis on identifying and building relationships with evidence users, who have the ability to make or shape policy, has added new dimensions to researchers' perceptions of their roles. These researchers will continue to draw upon APRA research findings far beyond the programme, and continue applying the skills and experience of planning impact pathways and delivering engagement activities. APRA, with ICE and ALRE back-up, has far exceeded its output and engagement milestones, by supporting teams in clearly communicating research findings in non-technical language and using accessible formats, such as blogs and print media.

In summary, the ALRE-ICE collaboration has enhanced APRA's value for money in five important ways:

1. By improving the quality, articulation, and influencing power of the research evidence being produced by acting as a 'critical friend' and

constantly challenging teams with the 'so what?' question.

2. By drawing on the learnings and experiences from both FAC and different APRA research teams, to share and multiply learning in real time to inform actionable recommendations during delivery – rather than at predetermined mid-term or endline evaluation moments.
3. By identifying and documenting influencing outcomes of APRA, based upon the lived experience of supporting research teams, to deliver their pathways to influence, and in accompanying the evolution of their engagement strategies in response to evolving policy contexts.
4. By documenting and publishing APRA's learning on research to policy linkages for broader consumption beyond the programme.
5. By supporting the capacity of African researchers, both senior academics and early career researchers, to assess and articulate potential policy influence pathways and building their confidence to engage in policy conversations.

'We have learned to communicate our research, confront our fears to meet policy stakeholders and face them boldly with our evidence.' APRA researcher at final reflection event

The ALRE-ICE partnership has acted as an important mechanism in maximising the research investment, and in ensuring that support is provided to researchers so they can periodically take a step back from their research and reflect on how emerging messages will be received and used by potential policy audiences. The capacity developed in teams to understand impact pathways, identify evidence users and listen to their needs, and clearly communicate research findings, has enhanced the relevance and effectiveness of the APRA research investment. In addition, it has provided the foundations for APRA's legacy, as research teams carry forward both their findings and ALRE-ICE thinking into their future research, communications, and engagement activities.

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