



Agricultural Policy Research in Africa



LESSONS LEARNT FROM DELIVERING THE AGRICULTURAL POLICY RESEARCH IN AFRICA (APRA) PROGRAMME

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Louise Clark is the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) Manager at the Institute of Development Studies and Martin Whiteside is an independent consultant, together they formed the Accompanied Learning on Relevance and Effectiveness (ALRE) team which was an integral part of the APRA programme. This paper is a synthesis of the views and learning from a large number of researchers involved in the APRA programme. We thank them for their candid reflections. We would also like to thank Susanna Cartmell and the Impact, Communications and Engagement (ICE) team for their help in bringing together the many people involved in APRA in different reflection and learning events.

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Introduction

This report brings together the key delivery lessons from a large evidence-to-policy programme. The Agricultural Policy Research in Africa¹ (APRA) programme was a six-year (2016–2022), £7 million research initiative of the Future Agricultures Consortium² (FAC), to produce high-quality evidence to inform policy and practice on future agricultural commercialisation options and investments in sub-Saharan Africa. APRA researchers conducted numerous mixed-methods, multi-country studies 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- and medium-scale independent producers, to provide new insights into the changing dynamics of agricultural commercialisation trajectories and their differential effects on disadvantaged women and youth.

APRA was a complex, multi-country programme working across nine countries in three regions – East,

West, and Southern Africa³ – to deliver three ‘Work Streams’ (WS) and an ambitious research agenda, in terms of innovative data collection methodologies and analytical approaches and the scale of outputs produced.⁴ APRA was supported from its Inception Phase in 2016 by a dedicated Impact, Communications and Engagement (ICE) team and, from 2019, by the Accompanied Learning for Relevance and Effectiveness (ALRE) team, who worked in close collaboration to provide APRA research teams with support to design, deliver, and communicate quality research outputs and maximise their relevance to policy audiences.

The ALRE team have acted in a ‘critical friend’ role, supporting periodic reviews of APRA teams’ Participatory Impact Pathway Analysis (PIPA)⁵ plans, as well as Evidence to Policy Roundtable conversations with policy audiences. More informal meetings were also held with teams to stimulate reflection, improve practice, and document the learnings emerging from specific country and regional level activities. These insights were used to inform planning of subsequent policy and stakeholder engagement events and activities.

As APRA comes to a close, ALRE has produced a series of six *Contribution Case Studies*,⁶ which complement

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- 1 APRA website: <https://www.future-agricultures.org/apra/>
 - 2 FAC website: <https://www.future-agricultures.org/>
 - 3 APRA focal countries were Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Nigeria, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe. Additional studies were also conducted in Kenya, Mozambique and Zambia.
 - 4 APRA research was divided into three ‘Work Streams’ (WS1 – Panel Studies; WS2 – Longitudinal Studies; WS3 – Policy Studies), 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); and three major ‘COVID-19 Studies’ (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).
 - 5 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(8): 946–958. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237079470_Participatory_Impact_Pathways_Analysis_a_practical_method_for_project_planning_and_evaluation
 - 6 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; 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; 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.

six *ICE Insight* stories⁷ to document some of APRA's most promising outcomes and innovations. In addition, the ALRE team has produced several publications to capture key lessons from APRA and other research to policy initiatives. This document summarises the key lessons learnt during the six years of the APRA programme, drawing on ALRE and ICE processes and further informed by a final survey of APRA researchers and a 'Review and Learning' event held in early April 2022 – which brought teams together to reflect on what went well and what could be improved. The purpose of this document is to provide advice from APRA experience for the future planning of evidence to policy programmes.

Part 1 – General lessons for research to policy programmes

These lessons have been developed through ALRE and ICE interaction with the APRA research teams during the life of APRA and also from the FAC programme, which was a precursor to APRA. Some of the detailed evidence leading to these lessons is available in longer publications by ALRE.⁸

Policy is political: Understand the political economy

Consider the political economy and power dynamics of the policy and practice environment through a PIPA and/or Theory of Change (ToC) process to identify the key stakeholders and their interests, how these interests may be served or challenged by new evidence, and whether they are likely to play a supporting or challenging role. Also think about critical moments and potential windows of opportunity for influence. **Understanding the institutional environment** for competing policies, interests, and mechanisms for delivery is key. Shifting

policy often requires reframing the identified problem and proposed solution, embedding new thinking and ideas within institutions to build their ownership, and enabling implementation. In addition, it is important to acknowledge the role of 'surprises' i.e. crises, and other unplanned or unforeseen events in disrupting and shaping policy processes. These can open up new policy 'spaces' or 'windows', through which new evidence and ideas can be introduced into a policy debate. To take advantage of these opportunities, a policy actor must be nimble and adept to seize these opportunities to inject some fresh thinking into the deliberations.

Consider evidence demand in the research design phase

Design for demand, by planning policy-influencing strategies alongside the research design at the start of the programme to ensure research is guided by demand. The **framing of research to development discourse and agendas** can identify hooks to demonstrate how research findings contribute to existing or emerging policy conversations and priorities; for example, understanding the mandate and agendas of multilateral organisations.

Demand is often time-sensitive. If a particular policy is being reviewed, or a new programme being developed, then the evidence being produced may be in high demand and achieve rapid and significant policy traction. The same evidence six months after policy approval or programme finalisation may be distinctly unwelcome and achieve little traction. This means that evidence producers need to be aware of the current debates, emerging policy reviews and programmes being planned, and may need to be prepared to adjust their focus or timetables accordingly.

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- 7 Reeve, S., Mutimer, A., Cartmell, S. and Frost, O. (2022) *Investing in Social Media Pays Big Dividends*. APRA ICE Insight 1. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17356>; Cartmell, S., Frost, O., Mutimer, A. and Reeve, S. (2022) *Making the Most of the Media*. APRA ICE Insight 2. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17357>; Frost, O., Cartmell, S., Reeve, S. and Mutimer, A. (2022) *Communicating New Evidence Through APRA Working Papers and Briefs*. APRA ICE Insight 3. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17358>; Reeve, S., Cartmell, S., Mutimer, A. and Frost, O. (2022) *e-Dialogues Spark Debate on the Dynamics of Agricultural Commercialisation*. APRA ICE Insight 4. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17359>; Mutimer, A., Cartmell, S., Reeve, S. and Frost, O. (2022) *The Power of Blogs to Share Research and Communicate Policy Lessons*. APRA ICE Insight 5. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17361>; Cartmell, S., Mutimer, A., Reeve, S. and Frost, O. (2022) *Raising the Profile of Agricultural Policy Research: National Engagement as a Pathway to Change*. APRA ICE Insight 6. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/17434>
- 8 Whiteside, M. (2021) *From Field Research to Policy Change: Lessons from FAC and APRA*. ALRE Working Paper 1. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16777>; Whiteside, M. (2021) *Research to Policy Influencing: Lessons from APRA on Efficiency, Effectiveness and Sustainability*. ALRE Research Note 4. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16742>

Engaging with decision-makers in the research design phase, by inviting them to attend key events, has the potential to create a sense of ownership of research findings. Co-construction of the research increases the chances that a policymaker will champion findings and endorse a specific recommendation. This is particularly valuable where research findings may challenge established norms or vested interests. Budgets should include costs to support sustained engagement to build relationships with policy champions through attendance at events, field visits (if appropriate), or invitations to peer review outputs. Decision-makers will face time constraints, so it is important to be conscientious of requests on their time and manage expectations on time frames or the potential of research to deliver policy solutions if these are not yet clear.

Actively strengthen capacity to support policy influencing through a range of skills – from facilitating impact pathways analysis and advocacy planning to networking and effective communication approaches. Policy influencing is a different skill set to research and many researchers lack confidence on communicating and influencing non-academic audiences. Investing in these skills for early career researchers has a legacy that goes beyond specific projects.

Increasing the research capability among African research teams, building the professional and personal relationships between researchers, and strengthening the networks between organisations working on commercialisation and inclusion issues, are all important subsidiary outcomes of research processes.

Team membership and personal contacts matter

Having a mix of senior and more junior researchers with different disciplinary expertise is challenging for all, but delivers well as long as appropriate guidance and support is provided. Team members who are semi-retired government officials and senior university professors can provide important influencing channels into government and academic circles, and also impart an important historic perspective. Younger and diverse members can provide new ideas and challenge existing thinking.

Allocating time for mentoring early career researchers may be necessary and is important for longer-term capacity development.

Achieving synergy between qualitative and quantitative methods

There may be a temptation to keep the qualitative and quantitative data collection separate because of differing skill sets, inflexible timetables for collection and analysis, or restricted budgets. However, significant synergy can

be realised by **efficient and flexible integration**. This could mean light-touch qualitative enquiry leading into the design of the quantitative survey work, with some further qualitative work running alongside the quantitative to triangulate in real time. After completing quantitative analysis, some more focussed qualitative methods can be conducted to contextualise and triangulate the findings. Finally, at the policy implication stage, further qualitative exercises may be helpful in testing and feeding back recommendations to and with a wide variety of stakeholders.

Build relationships

Authority matters, so policy ideas and inputs may need to come from the 'right' level of authority in the 'right' organisation with the 'right' national credentials. Personal relationships, trust, and perceived integrity of evidence, messenger, and message can be critical. Different audiences prefer different formats and emphasis, so it is important to be prepared to respond to this demand. This may involve working with people who straddle the knowledge-policy space, and investing time, patience, and persistence to build relationships and listen to their needs and agendas.

Work in alliances to pool skills, experience, and interests with potential advocacy partners, who complement researchers' ability to produce rigorous and objective evidence with their expertise in policy influence. **Bringing diverse voices together to build consensus** helps to create a common vision and mandate for policy change around a specific issue. Encouraging researchers to coordinate with multiple constituents from state, private sector, academia, and civil society can also enable the coordination of complementary influencing and advocacy strategies and identify a common framing that helps to amplify disparate voices. Establishing or strengthening networks with other researchers may provide a way to validate and reinforce evidence or show how findings apply to other contexts or regions. Stakeholders, such as funding agencies, private sector actors, and local governments, can often be advocacy partners in one context and targets of advocacy in others.

Work at multiple policy levels to explore how priorities across regional, national, state, and district levels intersect. Furthermore, to investigate where there may be resonance that links specific evidence with a broader policy question to demonstrate potential for replication or roll out, or to leverage national and regional agendas or debates to gain traction at the state or district level.

Be agile and responsive

Timing is critical to the relevance of research, so teams need sufficient flexibility to respond to emerging policy processes and debates. **Be nimble and be**

prepared to adapt: there are no linear processes to policy change. Take advantage of shifting positions among key stakeholders and the potential influencing opportunities this may provide. Creating regular spaces to reflect and assess the evolving context, as well as listening to key voices, can be critical. Funding flexibility can also support responsiveness and enable projects to draw down on additional resources and support as opportunities arise.

Be clear about how research adds value

Outline how **practical solutions offer policy opportunities** to demonstrate how research on what works and best practice can offer insights to inform policy or programme implementation. **Add value** by demonstrating how findings build upon and expand knowledge from existing research, evaluation, or policy reflections and processes. Demonstrating new insights from qualitative evidence to existing quantitative studies, or statistically validating feedback, can show how findings bring a new dimension and perspective to existing thinking or practice.

Be active and inclusive in mainstreaming gender and social difference into research and engagement activities. This needs to go beyond reporting disaggregated data (e.g., by gender, age, wealth, ethnicity, or other characteristics), to understanding (and testing) how policy implications are likely to impact on different groups, and how policy recommendations may be used (and mis-used) to pursue policies and practices that favour some groups and interests over others. Simple data disaggregation may be misleading, so understanding intra-household relationships is likely to be necessary. The gendered experience of a woman in a male-headed household is likely to be different to a woman household head. The experience of younger female and male household members may also be very different.

Demonstrate how evidence can inform decision-making and support shifts in understanding and attitudes among key stakeholders. These changes will be gradual, but periodic reflection on progress can generate learning to continue to strengthen influencing strategies.

Craft and target messages to specific audiences

Use multiple communication channels and formats through different networks to distil research data into products that can be clearly communicated and understood. High-level decision-makers require strong and clear messages, whilst technical staff will have a greater interest in guidelines and details. Policy briefs and blogs are effective at highlighting key issues and stimulating interest. Media days and field visits can

support popular communication of evidence and build relationships between researchers and journalists.

Build policy momentum around new evidence and ideas

Be mindful of the economics of attention. Attention is focussed mental engagement on a particular item of information; when new evidence and insights come into our awareness, we attend to a particular item, and then decide whether to act on it. Policymakers have limited bandwidth to engage with academic outputs, but endorsement of research findings by other academics and researchers can validate new thinking and start to build momentum around new ideas – and this has the potential to capture policymaker attention. Moreover, coordination between research institutes supports the sustainability and legacy of those research findings and methodologies.

Communications and engagement support can improve influencing outcomes

Even excellent researchers may not be experienced or confident in less-academic communication or engagement with policymakers or the media (it can be scary!). Dedicated communication and engagement support alongside accompanied learning can build the confidence and skills that significantly increase the influencing impact of the research evidence generated.

Approaches such as PIPA, exploring ToC related to policy change, and accompanied learning, enables research teams to identify what parts of their research findings (the ‘nuggets’) are of most interest to policymakers. Supporting research teams in writing blogs and policy briefs summarising their findings for a wider audience and engaging with the local media can be very effective, but does need appropriate resourcing throughout the programme.

Accompanied learning provides additional benefits

Traditionally, many programmes have an external mid-term and final evaluation. This may provide objective accountability, but there are challenges in understanding the underlying issues in a short evaluation – with project participants understandably defensive and cautious about raising issues of concern with the evaluators. The final evaluation is usually too late to feed in to improving the final outcomes.

Accompanied learning, in which a team with appropriate skills provide a ‘critical friend’ function throughout the life of the programme, can be a way of identifying challenges, working with participants to overcome them and, in a multi-site programme, to feedback learning to other parts of the larger programme. Trust and mutual

understanding can be built over time. In an evidence-to-policy programme, a key role of the ‘critical friend’ is to constantly challenge the researchers on the policy relevance of their findings (the ‘so what?’ question); to keep gender and social difference at the forefront of their thinking (‘how does this affect women/youth etc?’); and to plan their evidence communication strategies, thinking outside the traditional academic publication box (‘who needs to know this and how will they?’).

Part 2 – Lessons specific to the APRA programme

In addition to the more generic lessons that have been extracted from the APRA programme, the APRA ALRE team facilitated research teams to reflect on what they learnt from being part of the APRA programme. These observations are recorded here in relation to what worked well and what could have been improved (or what they would do differently next time).

Programme management

What worked well:

The overall coordination and organisation of the APRA programme was perceived as excellent, with clear coordination and governance arrangements, specified roles and responsibilities, and a robust management system to ensure high-quality work, timely delivery, and rigorous budget control. APRA drew on the experience gained by FAC – which was funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) from 2005–2013 – as well as the policies and procedures of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK, which hosted the APRA Directorate, to achieve the expected outputs, outcomes, and impacts. The Directorate provided strategic leadership, financial oversight, and technical support to the country teams.

The APRA Coordination Team (ACT) was considered to have functioned well. It was led by the Chief Executive Officer, together with the Programme Manager, Director of Research, ICE Team Lead, and three Regional Coordinators in Ghana (University of Ghana), Kenya (Centre for African Bio-Entrepreneurship), and South Africa (the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies, University of the Western Cape). The ACT met regularly to review progress against programme indicators and milestones, identify any urgent problems that required immediate attention, and maintain a focus on higher-level aims and objectives. It also convened regional and programme-wide review and planning events, tracked the work of all country and study teams, and supported the Directorate to produce its Annual Review reports for Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO, formerly DFID). Furthermore, the ACT worked closely with the ALRE and ICE teams on the accompanied learning, communications and engagement plans, and activities to ensure these

were aligned and operationalised appropriately. It also coordinated the work of the Data Management Team (DMT), which was responsible for providing guidance to the APRA teams on their research designs and sampling strategies, and methods of data collection and analysis (see below). The APRA Directorate, ACT, ALRE, ICE, and DMT worked together to maintain quality in addition to ensuring delivery.

Programme management was perceived as nimble and flexible, which was particularly important in guiding research teams through the APRA COVID-19 crisis and navigating the uncertainty and stress of delivering research during a global pandemic.

“Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, we were able to produce the various outputs. The major lesson is that policymakers are influenced by factors other than research evidence. Thus, we have to convey the message as best as we can and give them evidence they can use to inform their decisions.”

“Given the flexibility required under COVID-19 lockdown, I believe the research went well.”

APRA management also invested heavily in capacity strengthening at all levels. Support was provided through direct training and mentoring. In the early stages of APRA, they found face-to-face learning and knowledge exchange to be the most effective form of support for the data analysis and write-up of results (e.g. WS ‘Writesops’ and Review and Planning Workshops). Unfortunately, these activities were suspended following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the crisis, APRA tested and rolled out a variety of alternative communications approaches, with support from the IDS Computer and Technical Services, to allow more online meetings and trainings through combining a number of new communications and planning tools (MS Teams, Zoom, Google Hangouts) with existing tools (SharePoint, Skype, Trello, WhatsApp). They also intensified support activities, systematising them as much as possible to ensure even closer monitoring of the production pipeline. Virtual exchanges were supplemented by written guidance and documentation (‘How To’ guides, technical notes, common reporting formats, regular Progress Reports, etc.), and a considerable amount of individual mentoring and team backstopping. Consequently, APRA colleagues became more adept at using these tools and approaches in the final two years of the programme, which ensured timely reporting and delivery of key knowledge products with only limited face-to-face interactions.

Early career researchers in the APRA countries greatly appreciated the commitment and mentorship provided by ACT, ALRE, ICE, and DMT, as well as senior researchers and professors in their teams to build their confidence and capacity.

What could be improved:

There were mixed views on budget allocations, with views ranging from satisfaction that this had been done well, to highlighting a need to leverage other resources to fill funding gaps and manage expectations more effectively. There was frustration among some that the DFID/FCDO funding processes lacked flexibility and were not conducive to nimble working.

Team structures

What worked well:

APRA successfully created interdisciplinary teams able to conduct mixed methods (quantitative and qualitative) comparative research, which ensured a holistic understanding of the context; but this also created challenges to agree a common approach. The experience of Nigeria WS1 provides an example of the added value of inclusive coordination and bringing diverse team members, including enumerators, together to make sense of the empirical findings:

“Incorporating government (and ex-government) officials into APRA teams was valuable to support access and uptake of research by government.”

What could be improved:

In a six-year programme, team turnover must be anticipated. Flexibility is required when key team members move on to other jobs (as happened on a number of occasions), or sadly pass away at key points in the programme. Similarly, there should be mechanisms to periodically assess workloads and ensure that some team members (particularly for early career researchers) are not carrying an excessive share of the work.

Research programmes of this size and length should put explicit emphasis on building capacity of those researchers, and across the broad range of skills required, to deliver policy-focussed research. This requires allocating adequate funds and human resources not only for training, but sustained mentoring and support – for research, data analysis, and preparation of academic and policy outputs for publication.

Research design

What worked well:

APRA applied a rigorous mixed methods/interdisciplinary approach with a good balance of quantitative and qualitative research. The programme chose the right selection of research topics and site selection to address key agricultural commercialisation and rural

development challenges; and there was excellent integration of local and national evidence. Technical advisory support by the DMT to teams on research design, implementation, data analysis, and synthesis was also excellent; and mobilising the entire APRA team to overcome challenges arising from COVID-19 pandemic and successfully implementing an entirely new set of COVID-related studies showed great agility.

APRA invested considerable time during the Inception Phase to identify key topics and sites for research early in the programme. Reflections generated positive feedback on APRA research design in terms of country, site, and topic selection, with a good spread of countries across regions and successful location of field sites; for example, in the WS1 studies on medium-scale farmers in Nigeria. Researchers were empowered by their participation and inclusion in the selections of specific research topics, and felt that the broad theme of inclusive agricultural commercialisations was relevant and provided flexibility to address new issues – for example the importance of rice processors and rural labour markets.

“I think APRA has been great on so many levels. It’s really inspiring to be part of something that is so driven from African universities, and to work with such excellent colleagues.”

What could be improved:

Investing more in integrating research and analysis across WS (panel, longitudinal, and policy studies) would have been worthwhile, along with providing more resources for qualitative follow-up after in-depth quantitative surveys. APRA researchers also highlighted adding more and longer panels to track change over longer time periods to analyse changing conditions and outcomes; allowing more time to undertake research and analysis and allocating more resources to support early career training and capacity building. Providing more review and assistance with preparing journal articles (as was done for the APRA Working Papers and APRA Briefs) was also stated.

Time constraints: Time was highlighted as a constraint, particularly in delivering highly complex panel studies within the programme’s time frame. APRA’s WS1 panel studies generated lessons with intervals of at least three to five years, and three rounds of data collection would have generated much stronger data and analysis of shifting trends.

Time constraints were also felt in relation to data analysis and carving out the time needed for effective technical reviews of data and publications, especially to support early career researchers and ensure quality, clarity, and consistency of messages.

Scope of data collection: Some considered that, in hindsight, APRA's research design was overambitious in its scope and scale, and there was a danger of losing sight of how the data collected responded to specific research questions. The research generated vast datasets that were time consuming to clean and analyse, and it was challenging to integrate key data, for example on gender, into emerging findings.

Incorporating different perspectives: Even though considerable effort went into stakeholder engagement during the Inception Phase of the programme, a few researchers felt that more could have been done to foster a dialogue with key policy audiences to inform their initial research design. Several researchers also felt that APRA could have taken a stronger food systems approach to gain a broader perspective of commercialisation and market dynamics; although thinking on this has advanced further in more recent years.

Incorporating additional voices from the private sector into the research process could have generated greater insights, for example, to understand the perspective of produce buyers who are often assumed to be unfair. Produce buyers and processors also have valuable insights that have potential to resonate with policy audiences. Another reflection was the need for a stronger emphasis on farm labour in some contexts, although this was a strong focus of some APRA studies.

Wider issues, such as health and the environment, are also important considerations in research design. APRA included a major component on food and nutrition security that was built into the original design, particularly in WS1. APRA was able to highlight differential nutrition outcomes in our WS1 and COVID-19 assessments in particular. To date, not all food and nutrition data has been fully analysed – so there is also a need to consider capacity for analysis in research design and to ensure clarity on how data collected will be used to answer specific research questions.

Data analysis

What worked well:

Data collection and processing: APRA's ambitious research agenda involved sophisticated use of Computer Assisted Personal Interview hardware for some quantitative and qualitative data collection. As noted above, the DMT and APRA Directorate played a crucial role in strengthening the capacity of the teams in using these new technologies effectively and efficiently and supporting them with their data analysis and processing efforts – including after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, when most APRA research switched to virtual forms of data collection and management. APRA is perceived to have generated rigorous data that is widely valued by both the researchers themselves and their target audiences.

Mixed methods approach: Research teams found the use of mixed methods and the combination of quantitative and qualitative research approaches very useful, supporting triangulation and enabling teams to tell the story behind the data.

"The balance between qualitative and quantitative was optimal for Malawi. We conducted two rounds of both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data has been useful in making sense and providing explanations for the quantitative data."

What could be improved:

There were some technical issues in implementing the World Bank's Survey Solutions software, including challenges with connectivity and time investment in enumerator supervision. In some cases, changing enumerator assignments when households were not available posed another difficulty. For other teams, the flexibility and data backup added value and outweighed the more challenging aspects.

Despite positive feedback on APRA's mixed methods approach and considerable effort to train teams in reviewing data analysis protocols and comparing results – particularly for the WS1 survey analysis, WS2 studies, and the COVID studies – in some studies, the ambition to fully integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches became diluted and was not fully realised. More could have been done to draw on qualitative data to identify micro trends and recognise opportunities for change. The pivot to focus attentions on COVID-19 at a critical point in the research cycles was suggested as one factor which prevented the realisation of this ambition. In another case, overspend on survey work limited the production of substantial qualitative work:

"We did not have enough resources to do a thorough qualitative study to support our quantitative studies. This could have strengthened our understanding of some of the results we obtained from our quantitative analysis."

Many teams provided feedback and validated their quantitative survey and qualitative focus group data with the sample communities involved in their research, but this could have been done even more comprehensively by all teams. Doing so would have added greater depth to the analysis and interpretation of findings, by validating the household livelihood trajectories identified in the quantitative research to help inform the design of follow-up surveys and interviews with households.

On research synthesis: APRA could have done more to deliver even stronger synthesis across research countries and WS. With such a broad and ambitious research agenda, the programme sometimes struggled to keep sight of the big picture and implications of

findings for inclusive agricultural commercialisation. There was limited integration across WS and some remained siloed throughout the programme; although there were some good examples where strong connections were made (e.g., rice agro-processing and value chain upgrading linking WS1 Tanzania and WS2 Ethiopia; WS3 Political Economy and COVID-19 Value Chain studies; and WS3 Growth Corridors and Livestock Commercialisation studies).

Hubs and programme leadership should have placed a stronger emphasis on integration, particularly to draw upon the findings of the WS3 outputs. Disruptions caused by the FCDO budget cuts and the COVID-19 crisis clearly affected this aspect of the work – and although ALRE made efforts to support this synthesis in the final months of the programme, this was too little too late.

Some effort was made to do this integration around particular cross-cutting thematic studies – e.g., assets and poverty, climate change, gross margins, political economy, social difference, and so on – as was planned at the start of APRA. Various APRA Working Papers, Briefs, and journal articles resulted from this work. Nevertheless, a stronger emphasis on synthesis and distilling the overarching narrative would have been more effectively embedded through comparative studies or more systematic cross-country sense-making processes.

In some cases, data was shared between study teams. For example, the WS3 climate study in Zimbabwe⁹ drew on data collected by WS1 and WS2, but more could have been done to support reflection and synthesis across these. WS3 papers generated interesting and focussed insights resulting in strong journal outputs, but these findings were sometimes poorly integrated with other WS.

The challenges of drawing conclusions from data gathered by the WS2 longitudinal studies – before the second round of data collection had been completed by the WS1 panel studies – meant WS2 was perceived as peripheral to WS1, with challenges to draw upon the insights to deliver a broader understanding of a dynamic commercialisation pathway. However, some teams – e.g., Tanzania and Zimbabwe, where both panel and longitudinal studies were conducted, and Nigeria, where both WS1 and WS3 policy studies focused on

the emerging role of medium-scale farmers – were able to make good connections and draw out insights from across their research.

In addition, more could have been done to compare evidence from selected study areas with national level data to generate insights from study locations which resonated with national trends and tendencies. For example, in Zimbabwe, WS2 was productive but had insufficient opportunity for country and regional synthesis on competing commercialisation pathways.

“I think (improvement) would be around strengthening the integration and working across WS1, WS2, and WS3, and linking up more fully with the crosscutting themes. My sense is that these remained siloed till the end.”

Some investment was made to compare APRA WS1 survey data with nationally-representative surveys conducted as part of the World Bank’s Living Standards Measurement Studies in Ghana, Nigeria, and Malawi. These comparisons were produced as a set of reports and compiled in a single document near the end of the programme.¹⁰ FCDO budget cuts meant that further work could not be conducted. If funds had allowed, it would have been helpful to have these produced earlier and for all APRA countries to inform thinking about changing patterns of commercialisation and differential livelihood outcomes.

Data legacy

APRA researchers generated a tremendous amount of data from their studies, some of which has allowed multi-country and multi-phase analyses (allowing the tracking of commercialisation and agrarian change processes and differential outcomes relating to them over space and time). This rich set of data from multiple study sites and countries is a major legacy of the programme.

As APRA comes to a close, there is a pressing need to focus on effective data management to archive, decentralise, and curate data to ensure this is made open source and available and accessible in host countries for future research initiatives.

“APRA teams collected very good data that could form a reliable baseline for future panel studies.”

9 Newsham, A., Shonhe, T. and Bvute, T. (2021) *Commercial Tobacco Production and Climate Change Adaptation in Mazowe, Zimbabwe*. APRA Working Paper 64, Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://opendocs.ids.ac.uk/opendocs/handle/20.500.12413/16859>

10 Hodey, L., Matita, M. and Saha, A. (2022) *Patterns and Drivers of Agricultural Commercialisation: Evidence From Ghana, Nigeria and Malawi*. Brighton: Future Agricultures Consortium. Available at: <https://www.futureagricultures.org/publications/patterns-and-drivers-of-agricultural-commercialisation-evidence-from-ghananigeria-and-malawi/>

What worked well:

APRA developed and implemented a Data Management Strategy, which included a clear plan for collating and storing all key datasets on IDS OpenDocs. Key datasets will be made available in anonymised form following the close of the programme and after a one-year period of acceptable first-use by APRA study/country teams.

What could be improved:

Not all APRA research teams have completed the preparing the necessary metadata and related supporting documentation for their datasets, which will enable their future use both by their own researchers and by others. The APRA Directorate and DMT will need to work with those teams beyond the end of the programme to ensure these datasets are useable in future.

Lessons on the policy influencing and communication

Publications and outputs

What worked well:

PIPA planning and support from the ICE and ALRE teams to refine outcome-oriented theories of change and identify impact pathways was highlighted by some APRA researchers, as well as getting coverage of research findings into the national and regional media (some teams). Many APRA researchers commented on the excellent editorial and design assistance to produce an incredible number of blogs, papers, and open-access journal articles for different audiences, along with the great support in convening and facilitating a wide range of policy workshops, conferences, and e-Dialogues, often in collaboration with key partners. Others commented on the building on informal connections for policy engagement with the help of the APRA network and Regional Reference Groups, as well as organising feedback workshops to share research results with communities in the districts in which the APRA studies were conducted.

The ICE team provided timely and consistent backstopping on publications. Blogs and Briefs are valuable communication tools that should be structured around how evidence provides solutions to specific policy problems (demand driven), rather than being only summarising separate pieces of research. Linking blogs and opinion pieces to topics of interest was successful in increasing readership; for example, the piece in *The Conversation* on [tobacco](#) and [COP26](#) was widely read. The experience gained during APRA has generated high interest amongst research teams to produce blogs and policy briefs as part of their future work.

Building on the FAC platform – in terms of the website, social media followers, and teams' connections and

knowledge – added significant value, which highlights the benefit of expanding on a previous successful programme. APRA's legacy is likely to continue through ongoing work of country and regional leads.

"We will continue engaging using APRA outputs as we will be leading the development of the rice flagship programme for Ethiopia."

With limited insights into who is reading publications, it remains challenging to gauge the impact of publication downloads from the websites. However, a readership survey of APRA contacts did provide some useful feedback and indicated that APRA Working Papers, Briefs, and blogs were valued and provided useful insights into research and policy recommendations to a variety of stakeholders.

"APRA's working papers have contributed a lot for rice sector development"

"The blogs brought important insights pertaining to the field of agriculture, with particular focus on agricultural commercialisation. They have helped reshape the thinking of rural smallholder farmers to consider shifting from predominantly subsistence to commercialisation"

APRA has successfully built constructive relationships with journalists and national media outlets. This should be considered as an ongoing process that requires managing expectations, particularly with longitudinal studies that have inconclusive insights between data rounds. During APRA, a WhatsApp group was created to stay in contact with journalists, and worked well in keeping them updated. These relationships have delivered an impressive diversity of media coverage, which created positive competition between countries to generate media stories from their research. Journalists also have incentives and it is useful to understand how these influence the stories they produce.

"APRA has been an important learning journey for myself and other researchers on the team. We have learned to communicate our research, confront our fears to meet policy stakeholders, and face them boldly with our evidence – all because it was a well-crafted research programme with sound methodology. But also because we received technical and communication support to do it well."

Alongside APRA's strong emphasis on media engagement and communicating with policy audiences through blogs and Briefs, academic conferences and seminars are still considered important to validating and building credibility of research findings. Publishing in open access journals and books is important for widening access beyond northern academic circles and achieving widescale and long-term impact. APRA

successfully ensured academic rigour and also ensured that over 80 per cent of its Working Papers and journal articles were written by Southern authors. Making these knowledge products open access and promoting them through social media channels meant that these outputs were able to reach a large number of academic readers across the region.

What could be improved:

Some APRA teams highlighted placing even greater emphasis on blogs and APRA Briefs, as these are widely read by policy audiences. FCDO did not see blogs as priority outputs and consequently, they are not included in APRA's formal Log Frame metrics; yet it is apparent they were a critical element of the programme's outreach and engagement work. Other team members pointed to the need to train researchers in communication and policy influencing methods to engage policymakers at an early stage of the programme. Additional investment in identifying specific policy spaces to inform and influence decision-making processes at regional and sub-regional levels was also seen as important. Several researchers suggested starting the preparation of journal articles even earlier and giving these more ICE team support (even though they are reviewed, edited, and produced by other publishers) – as well as investing more in communicating evidence to challenge the dominant narratives regarding agricultural commercialisation and pathways out of rural poverty.

Stronger emphasis on supporting writing skills and peer-to-peer support would have been appreciated. Face-to-face connections are helpful in obtaining constructive feedback and improvement. However, these processes were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the model of bringing teams together for 'Writesops' could not be replicated online.

"APRA research results will continue to provide evidence basis for policies in sub-Saharan Africa for decades to come if the website and all its rich content is maintained."

Stakeholder engagement and impact pathways

What worked well:

Monitoring and learning on relevance and effectiveness of research, engagement, and communication activities: Significant investment was made over the course of the APRA programme in designing and implementing effective stakeholder engagement strategies at study, regional, and country levels. This began in 2017, with the use of a modified PIPA approach to identify key stakeholders and develop initial engagement strategies at country and regional levels. Since 2018, APRA has been supported by a

team of monitoring and learning professionals to deliver its ALRE initiative. ALRE has worked closely with the ICE Team acting as a 'critical friend' to support constructive reflection to improve the relevance and effectiveness of APRA's research, ensure the independence and rigour of outcome reporting, and document learning on evidence-to-policy linkages. Together, ALRE and ICE worked with the APRA country/WS teams to refine their PIPA plans and associated outcome-level ToC. These activities have guided the engagement strategies and informed the framing of key policy messages emerging from research.

This approach has generated substantial learning on processes to build relationships to ensure that the emerging 'supply' of research is aligned with the 'demand' for evidence to inform specific policy debates and processes at both national and regional levels. Key lessons from this approach are shared as part of a series of ALRE *Contribution Case Studies* to reflect on the causal linkages between APRA research and observed outcomes. A final reflection workshop facilitated by ALRE, ICE, and ACT provided further insights from APRA members on both research and communications and engagement efforts.

PIPA planning and ongoing technical support from the ICE and ALRE teams was well appreciated and pushed research teams to think about their desired policy outcomes and consider the 'so what?' question of how their work could influence policy. Using PIPA processes to inform policy engagement activities worked well and helped teams develop strategies of who to target, and which messages to use.

Guided by these engagement plans, APRA has collaborated with a range of partners to co-organise and co-convene high-profile events, such as in-person workshops and conferences and online meetings – including academic networks and research programmes (e.g., Commercial Agriculture for Smallholders and Agribusiness, Foresight4Food, ReNAPRI, SPARC), donors (e.g., Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, DFID/FCDO, Canada's International Development Research Centre, Japan International Cooperation Agency), regional agencies (African Union Commission, East African Community), United Nations agencies and initiatives (e.g., International Fund for Agricultural Development, UN Food System Summit, UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network), CGIAR Centres (e.g., AfricaRice, International Food Policy Research Institute, International Rice Research Institute), and others. These partnerships allowed APRA to optimise its capacity to inform and influence key policy debates while limiting its own financial outlay to organise these engagements. These events involved national and regional policy makers and various private and public sector actors, and were attended by thousands of participants over the course of the programme.

The e-Dialogue series on ‘*What Future for Small-Scale Farming?*’ (2020) and ‘*Towards an Equitable and Sustainable Transformation of Food Systems*’ (2021–2022) provided an analytical bridge between national and regional research and even global debates and agendas, enabling teams covering different areas to compare and build a stronger combined narrative based on their findings.

The ICE Team ensured high-level engagement events to share APRA outputs were supported with effective communications packages, including blogs and social media.

Encouraging teams to engage with policymakers and influencers at various points during the project, rather than putting it off until the end, challenged research teams’ perceptions of research communications but ultimately added value. This also highlighted the value of informal connections to stay up-to-date with policy conversations and to gain access to the spaces where decisions are made.

“There should be a way to begin sharing the little information – as it comes in bits – with stakeholders to keep the conversation going. Waiting to get concrete results to share with stakeholders also meant we were not in the policy space, or only talking about our methodology.”

Work to build relationships with policymakers included engagement and presentation of findings at the district level – which brought farmers and policymakers together, and gave farmers a voice, and was seen to be valuable. This approach felt less extractive and generated a lot of benefit in sharing and discussing the policy implications of research directly with both policymakers and farmers’ groups.

“Farmers don’t have enough of a voice, especially in countries with a powerful private sector like Nigeria. So more effort needs to go into learning how agricultural policy research works to encourage and enable farmers to advocate for their own interests to work towards utilisation of research.”

Policy influencing plans need to consider how policymakers are guided by a range of factors other than research evidence: meaning influence takes time and needs a broad range of communication approaches.

Timing is critical. The experience of the Ethiopia rice programme, for example, demonstrates how presenting results to a national policymaking forum at a key moment – during the defining of national solutions and designing of socio-economic policy proposals – enabled APRA researchers to feed evidence directly into this policy process.

What could be improved:

There is a need for strong connections on the ground to drive research to policy linkages and follow up with in-person engagement where those opportunities exist. Accessing and engaging policymakers is time intensive and requires follow-up to build relationships, sustain their interest in research findings, and lobby for change. Training researchers in policy influencing and communications skills from the start of the programme can build their confidence and skills and encourage teams to engage with policymakers early in the research process.

Identifying specific policy spaces, such as parliamentary committees and technical working groups, has huge potential to establish connections and build networks to support sustained engagement with policymakers. There is a huge diversity of roles in policymaking, and it is useful for researchers to build relationships with individuals involved in the design and implementation of policy. Local and district level policymakers are also a key audience.

Once research has been completed, there is a need for time to focus on policy influencing. However, the groundwork for this needs to be laid earlier in the process so that key contacts have already been identified and relationships established.

Although some APRA activities successfully engaged policy audiences at regional and sub-regional levels (e.g., the rice commercialisation work and the East African Community Secretariat; the e-Dialogues and the African Union Commission; etc.), other teams required more support to deliver policy engagement at those levels.

“The impact seen during these six years has been great, but more engagement would help policymakers to put into action the new evidence shared through this research into practices.”

“We need a strategy to track influence of APRA beyond the life of the project.”

Regarding engagement with academic audiences and debates, it is important to start to think about the framing of journal articles as early as possible and accompany these with blogs and media engagement. Journal authorship can be used as a way to mentor and support early career researchers. It is necessary to monitor quality control of publications to ensure they present new knowledge nuggets and relevant policy implications, rather than recycling evidence across multiple articles.

Finally, it is also important to translate APRA materials into other languages (e.g., Swahili in Tanzania and Portuguese in Mozambique) to allow for greater engagement in various countries and regions. There were important local and national audiences that might not have been reached because of these linguistic barriers, yet they could have benefitted from learning of the new findings and policy lessons.

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