APRA

Agricultural Policy Research in Africa

Future Agricultures

e-Dialogue:
Transition
pathways and
strategies for
supporting
more equitable
and resilient
food systems in
Africa

23 March, 2022
13.00-15.00 GMT

E-DIALOGUES SPARK DEBATE ON THE DYNAMICS OF AGRICULTURAL COMMERCIALISATION

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In early 2022, the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) Programme of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC), in partnership with the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network and Foresight4Food, held an e-Dialogue series: *Towards an Equitable and Sustainable Transformation of Food Systems*. This followed an earlier, highly successful series organised with the same partners in the second half of 2020 on *What Future for Small-Scale Farming?*

The latest series included three online Zoom sessions led by APRA over January-March 2022: 1) 'Emerging Challenges and Regional Realities'; 2) 'COVID-19 and its Effects on Local Food Systems and Rural Livelihoods'; and 3) 'Transition Pathways and Strategies for Supporting More Equitable and Resilient Food Systems in Africa'. These virtual events were designed to replace an international conference that was part of APRA's original end-of-programme plan, before the COVID-19 crisis prevented large, physical gatherings. The three e-Dialogues brought together APRA researchers and expert commentators from across sub-Saharan Africa, as well as a wider audience. The objective of these dialogues was to examine evidence and lessons from APRA's six-year collaborative research programme (2016-22) analysing the dynamics of agricultural commercialisation processes, agrarian change and rural transformation in the region.

What did ICE do?

Pre-event preparation and presentation training

Ahead of each of the e-Dialogue events, the Impact, Communication and Engagement (ICE) team[1] provided APRA teams with guidelines for what to include in their five-minute PowerPoint presentations, including the number and design of slides and key research areas to highlight. The PowerPoints were reviewed by ICE for editing and to raise comments where the text was not clear or concise enough.

Practise presentation sessions were also organised to give the researchers an opportunity to test their internet connectivity, ensure they were speaking to time, and to develop their presentation style for optimum audience engagement and interest. The practise sessions predominantly focused on the presentation content, i.e., encouraging speakers to '*tell a story*' by including personal reflections/examples of people they had met during field work, and to focus on their research key findings and implications rather than study design.

Engaging an audience

To raise awareness of the e-Dialogues and to engage a relevant and diverse audience, the ICE team set up various social media and email campaigns.

Posters were created for Twitter and Facebook that paired strong images or speaker profile photos with event details, partner organisation logos and event hashtags. These were shared from around two weeks before each dialogue event with social media messages on the key themes, timings and registration links to encourage participation. To increase the reach of these posts, paid promotions using the Twitter Ads and Facebook boost tools were used for minimal cost.

The ICE team also set up Mailchimp email campaigns to send e-Dialogue updates to the FAC newsletter subscribers (an audience of 2,571). These emails provided information on the topics and intention of the dialogues, as well as an overview of the format and who would be speaking during the event. Similar emails were sent to a specific audience of 400 media representatives based across sub-Saharan Africa to encourage their participation and subsequent coverage of the event.

After each event, a summary article was written up by the ICE team and published on the APRA website to provide an overview of the session. A media article was also distributed by WREN*media*'s Nairobi-based correspondent, Bob Koigi, to his network, and articles published in the African region were collated and recorded.

What worked well?

The social media campaigns were very effective in circulating e-Dialogue messages to an online audience. For instance, for the January event, over a 15-day period, the promoted posts on Twitter achieved 72.9k impressions (the number of times they were seen).

Whilst newsletters and WhatsApp were also used to promote registration, asking APRA teams to directly circulate the event invitation to their networks really helped to ensure participation of in-country stakeholders. However, it should be noted that whilst registrations were high (over 400 for the first e-Dialogue), actual participation was usually only 25-33% of registrants.

'*These events helped push our policy messages to key stakeholders*' – Milu Muyanga, APRA Nigeria researcher

The pre-event preparatory documents and presentation training sessions also proved worthwhile, with general appreciation received from the APRA teams:

'*The pre-event mentorship and dry runs sessions were very helpful*' – Chris Magomba, APRA Zimbabwe researcher

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

'*The internal discussion and feedback prior to the final presentation was important to sharpen points and arguments to suit the audience*' – Aida Isinika, APRA Tanzania country lead

'*The reviews and feedback were excellent*' – Fred Dzanku, APRA Ghana country lead

Even though the presentation training was just a short, 30-45-minute exercise, it enabled the APRA teams to better focus their key messages and keep to time so that the presentations were more understandable to an external audience. Financial assistance, if required, was also provided to those teams who needed to find somewhere with stable internet connectivity.

e-Dialogue presentation guidelines and speaker PowerPoints were also sent to expert commentators invited to the event to help them prepare their short remarks. The commentators included academics, local government officials and policymakers, as well as APRA regional champions.

A 'dry run' was set up a few days before each event to ensure the e-Dialogue programme and format was clear to the key people involved; timings across different time zones were well understood; and to iron out any other technical issues with setting up breakout rooms, polls, etc.

The topics selected and content of discussions was appreciated by the general audience – as shown in responses to an external feedback survey:

'*The APRA e-Dialogue was interesting and should be continued to share scientific information and findings on how the African continent can overcome food insecurity*' – e-Dialogue survey respondent

'*The depth of discussions was so amazing and enlightening*' – e-Dialogue survey respondent

'*I found all the interventions interesting because the speakers highlighted the positive and negative aspects for different areas of Africa, giving a broad picture of the situation dealt with*' – e-Dialogue survey respondent

What could be improved?

Planning for a virtual event takes time, and the first e-Dialogue was particularly complicated, involving three regional sessions – split across three breakout rooms with facilitators – followed by a plenary session with all participants. The amount of content to cover also made the first event longer, which meant that some participants dropped off and did not stay for the plenary session.

With teams and others coming back late after the Christmas period, there was limited time to plan,

organise the event promotion, and encourage people to register, as well as to fit in the presentation training for all regional session speakers, in time for each of the events. Nevertheless, despite the short time period, good attendance was achieved – with 419, 205 and 142 people participating in each of the three dialogues respectively.

In the first e-Dialogue, keeping expert commentators to their allotted time proved challenging for the facilitators. This was subsequently improved by providing tighter guidelines and was easier for the second and final events which had just two experts, as opposed to six in the first.

Despite combined efforts from ICE and APRA teams, there were some issues with internet connectivity, which is difficult to avoid as it can vary from day to day and is hard to predict. The researchers indicated that the connectivity problems impacted on attendance. For instance, Adebayo Aromolaran, APRA Nigeria country lead, explains: '*Many participants, especially in Africa, were unable to participate effectively because of unstable Internet. This problem needs to be addressed in future if e-Dialogues continue to be a major outlet for research result dissemination.*' And, according to Mirriam Matita, APRA Malawi country co-lead, '*Not many practitioners/government or civil society organisations attended the sessions from Malawi, possibly lacking a culture for such online meetings or challenges in connectivity.*'

Another problem highlighted by the APRA teams regarded limitations of the e-Dialogue format to provide sufficient time to discuss each topic: '*Some arguments cannot be presented within a very short time. The number of presentations could be reduced so that what is shared is clearer,*' suggested Aida Isinika, APRA Tanzania country lead. Kojo Amanor, APRA Ghana researcher, also indicated that there was a '*Lack of critical dialogue*' due to '*too short presentations and reverence of dominant policies.*'

During the sessions, attendees were encouraged to add their comments/queries to the Zoom 'chat box', and to the comments box on Facebook, and the facilitators would then select the most pertinent to put to the speakers. Feedback from the teams – as well as the e-Dialogue participants responding to a short survey – indicated a wish for questions to come directly from participants.

'*Only one or two participants' questions were selected from the chat box*' – e-Dialogue survey respondent

'*I think the online events can be more interactive by inviting verbal comments from participants*' – e-Dialogue survey respondent

To invite the audience to ask questions, however, would be very difficult to manage. Given the large numbers of participants, the moderator has no idea who people are or what they might want to ask. It is also difficult to manage people's time if they take too long in posing their questions or offering comments. By selecting questions from the chat box, the moderator is able to ask several similar questions together under one theme and direct them to the panel accordingly.

Key lessons

Time management: Having sufficient time to organise virtual events is essential to allow for a well-thought-out agenda to be prepared and for speakers, commentators and moderators to be approached and well briefed. Adequate time to advertise the event and solicit sufficient numbers of registrants from a diverse range of stakeholders is also necessary. At the end of a research programme, when research teams are already busy with finalising outputs, organising such events can lead to additional time pressures and mean that the researchers find it challenging to prepare adequately. Ensuring that teams personally send event invitations would also ensure that key stakeholders who had interacted at their national events participated.

Guidelines for speakers and expert commentators: Providing a brief of the event and clear guidelines on the topic and expectations (including time of presentations/commentary) is highly recommended to ensure that everyone is clear on the event theme and expected direction for discussions.

Presentation training: Even having a short training session of 30-45 minutes proved extremely helpful to presenters and is a valuable investment to ensure that key messages are highlighted and honed. With one or two researchers, a shorter second session was organised to give them confidence that they had revised their presentation in line with feedback received.