



# COMMUNICATING NEW EVIDENCE THROUGH APRA WORKING PAPERS AND BRIEFS

**Olivia Frost, Susanna Cartmell, Sophie Reeve and Alice Mutimer**

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Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) has been a six-year research programme of the Future Agricultures Consortium (FAC), aiming to identify the most effective pathways to agricultural commercialisation that empower women, reduce rural poverty and improve nutrition and security in sub-Saharan Africa. Through in-depth, interdisciplinary, comparative research across nine countries, APRA has generated high-quality evidence and policy-relevant insights on more inclusive pathways to agricultural commercialisation. To disseminate its research findings and policy messages, APRA had a multi-format strategy to produce a portfolio of mutually-reinforcing publications to inform a broad spectrum of actors.

### **What did APRA do?**

'Working Papers' were designed to present and share country-level, thematic and cross-cutting research findings from across APRA's three Work Streams, Cross-Cutting Thematic Research and COVID-19 Studies.<sup>1</sup> 'Briefs' were originally based on longer Working Papers and provided a shorter overview, brief conclusions and policy recommendations; but, towards the end of the APRA programme, the authors were asked to produce more targeted and impactful 'Policy Briefs'.

During APRA's inception phase, it was noted in the Information, Communication and Engagement (ICE)<sup>2</sup> strategy that previous FAC Working Papers had been too broad and too long (up to 100 pages). After consulting with research teams, it was decided that the APRA Working Papers should be more focused on a specific topic, and shorter (no more than 35 pages). FAC Briefs were also felt to be too dense, and it was recommended that key messages be included with clear, concise and actionable policy recommendations.

Production of APRA outputs was supported by the ICE team, which – after internal and external review – took responsibility for style and editing and, to some extent, content coherence (if this had not been previously addressed). To maintain a consistent style across all APRA publications, researchers were provided with an APRA 'style guide' which, in addition to providing general writing style points, also covered the use of the APRA logo and images, information on referencing, and copyrights and gaining the correct permissions for tables and figures. The ICE team also worked directly with the designers to ensure that each paper maintained APRA's branding and was correctly formatted.

All Working Papers, Briefs and Research Notes – the latter highlight a research or data issue – were

published in a PDF format and were freely accessible on the **APRA website**, as well as the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) **OpenDocs** website. After publication, APRA teams were encouraged to write a short blog to reflect the key messages of the Working Paper/Brief in more accessible language, so as to be relevant and understandable to a wider audience. These were then included in APRA newsletters regularly sent to stakeholders, as well as disseminated via Twitter and Facebook. A selection of Briefs were also printed and disseminated via APRA country team leaders and regional coordinators, as well as being made available at relevant meetings and events.

The original logframe target was to produce 62 Working Papers by the end of APRA. In total, by the end of April 2022, 95 Working Papers and 37 Briefs had been published, in addition to 28 COVID-19 Papers, five Research Notes and 12 papers produced by the Accompanied Learning Relevant and Evidence team (ALRE). In the final 12 months of the programme, ICE supported the publication of 38 Working Papers, 11 Briefs, 10 COVID-19 Papers, one Research Note, and seven ALRE Papers.

### **What worked well?**

APRA's rigorous review process for Working Papers included an internal and an external review before each paper was copy edited to ensure final quality assurance. Some papers required more than one round of peer-review to ensure adequate quality.

The ICE team kept in regular touch with APRA teams to discuss and monitor the progress of outputs, and to ensure that each paper adhered to the review, style guide and permissions requirements. This close contact with the researchers, reviewers and designers enabled the ICE team to build good working relationships and to provide consistent support to the APRA researchers.

When APRA lead researchers were asked to rate the importance of Working Papers and Briefs in advancing their work (from 1: not important, to 5: extremely important), over 50% gave the highest rating of '5: extremely important', and over 40% researchers graded the outputs at 4 (Figure 1).

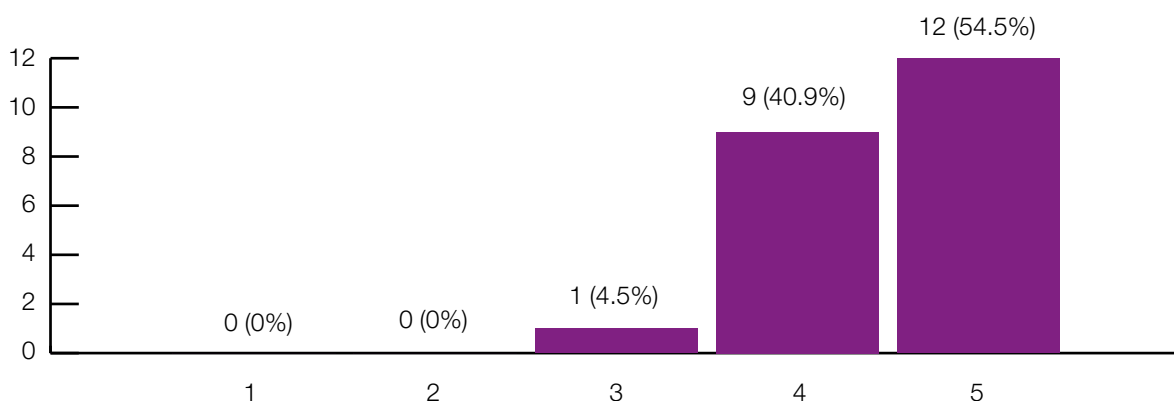
The vast majority (81%) of the researchers also rated the support they received from the ICE team in producing these outputs as 'extremely important', with the rest giving ICE support a score of 4 (as shown in Figure 2).

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1 APRA research was divided into 3 'Work Streams' or 'WS' (WS1 – Panel Studies; WS2 – Longitudinal Studies; WS3 – Policy Studies), a set of 'Cross-Cutting Studies'; and three major 'COVID-19 Studies' (an evidence review; an eight-country, multi-phase assessment; and a set of value chain case studies).

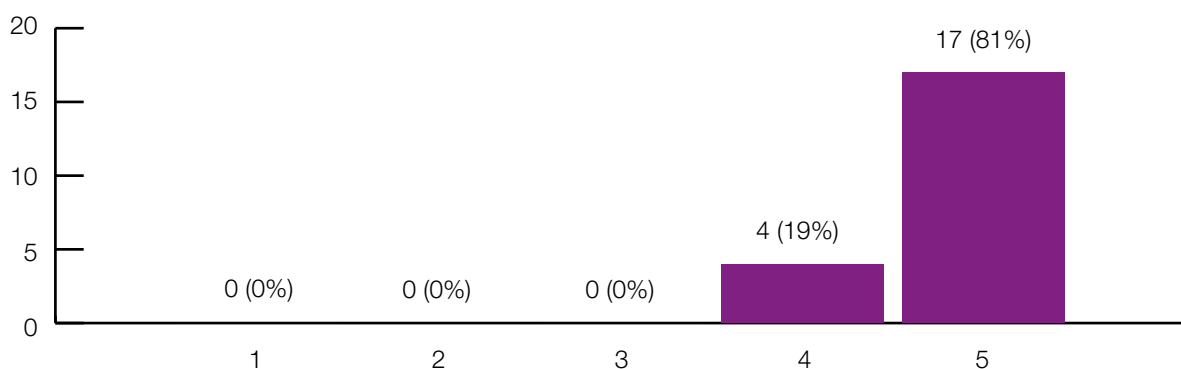
2 The ICE team is made up of members of **WRENmedia** staff, including its Director.

**Figure 1. APRA team responses to the ICE survey questionnaire on the importance of Working Papers and Briefs to advancing their work on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being the highest importance and 1 the lowest**



Source: Authors' own.

**Figure 2. APRA team responses to the survey questionnaire on how they would rate the ICE team's support in helping to produce Working Papers and Briefs on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being very supportive and 1 not supportive**



Source: Authors' own.

Overall, APRA researchers highlighted ICE's rigorous editing when asked what went well in APRA's publication process. *'The process for publishing is very meticulous and rigorous'*, stated Hannington Odame, APRA regional hub coordinator for East Africa.

The timeliness of ICE feedback was also mentioned by many of the researchers: *'The ICE team was very responsive and provided feedback within short periods of time. The internal and external review process also enhanced quality control of the publications,'* said Masautso Chimombo, APRA Malawi researcher.

Other APRA researchers emphasised how helpful ICE team support was in promoting the publications. *'The support and services provided [by ICE] were exemplary,'* noted Dawit Alemu, APRA Ethiopia country lead. An external review<sup>3</sup> of APRA's publications also highlighted that *'the quality and reach of publications has been significantly enhanced by support from the ICE team, who were available throughout the programme and highly valued by the Africa-based research teams.'*

### ***What could have been improved?***

Despite circulating a detailed *APRA Style Guide* document to all APRA researchers on several occasions, the ICE team found that many maintained the style with which they were most familiar, particularly when it came to referencing. Ensuring that references were correctly formatted proved incredibly time consuming and an ineffective use of the ICE team's time. The team encouraged researchers to try to standardise their own referencing but having several rounds of checking proved tedious to all. Initially, the APRA team adopted the same referencing style as IDS but decided to alter this to the more widely used 'Harvard System', as this allowed researchers to use automatic referencing software.

While APRA's extensive review process added to the rigour of outputs, it also took a considerable amount of time to complete and a great deal of admin time to manage. When asked what could have been done differently in APRA's publication process, some researchers raised the issue of time constraints,

3 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://doi.org/10.19088/APRA.2022.017>.

stating that more time to complete the publication process would have been better. Aida Isinika, APRA Tanzania country lead, felt that a *'focus on fewer things for higher impact delivery'* would have been beneficial. *'Reduce the number of Working Papers and increase the number of Briefs and blogs, so people with limited time can quickly get the message,'* suggested Ntengua Mdoe, APRA Tanzania researcher.

Initially, APRA Briefs were designed to be short versions of the Working Papers and, as such, were only reviewed by ICE and its team of science editors as the Working Papers had previously been externally reviewed. However, as APRA moved towards the end of the programme, the ALRE team felt that more targeted Policy Briefs would be more impactful for informing policy debates. Despite extensive support from ALRE and ICE teams, including providing APRA Policy Brief guidelines, research teams generally found producing overarching briefs much more challenging – and the final outputs often required complete revising and several rounds of redrafts by the ICE team.

With the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office cut to APRA's remaining budget in May 2021 (a 22% reduction to the end of the programme in April 2022), and a limit to the number of outputs that could be produced, a decision was made to allow each team to produce only one overarching APRA Policy Brief. To support the researchers, Martin Whiteside of the ALRE team was asked to provide teams with feedback to help authors strengthen their key policy messages. While this feedback was extremely helpful in enhancing the final set of Briefs, his involvement much earlier in the process would have been beneficial.

In their feedback, APRA researchers also called for more training to produce these outputs in order to *'effectively engage policymakers at the country level for impact,'* stated Hannington Odame, regional

coordinator for East Africa. This point was reinforced by Toendepi Shonhe, an APRA researcher in southern Africa, who commented: *'The communication and publicity skills for us as researchers can be improved.'*

## Key lessons

### **Maintaining standards and assuring quality:**

Providing detailed guidelines, as well as an appropriate technical procedure for quality assurance and ensuring researchers know where to access these (and how to use them), is key to producing quality outputs. Such documents should be made accessible through a dedicated resource page on the research programme website.

**Ensuring consistent referencing:** To reduce the burden on researchers and editors, a key recommendation would be to purchase a licence for automatic referencing software for the programme (e.g., Endnote, Mendeley, etc.) and provide training on how to use it. Enabling all reference lists to be automatically generated, in the correct style, would save considerable time and budget.

**Strengthening capacity:** Providing training on how to write Policy Briefs at the start of APRA and having a dedicated team of policy experts to review each brief and provide feedback would have provided researchers with more support and strengthened the final policy messages. Although APRA organised several 'writeshops' for its Work Stream research teams to produce and review draft outputs, more investment could be made in these intensive, peer-to-peer learning and writing sessions at key points in the output production process.

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The APRA Directorate is based at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK ([www.ids.ac.uk](http://www.ids.ac.uk)), with regional hubs at the Centre for African Bio-Entrepreneurship (CABE), Kenya, the Institute for Poverty, Land and Agrarian Studies (PLAAS), South Africa, and the University of Ghana, Legon. It builds on more than a decade of research and policy engagement work by the Future Agricultures Consortium ([www.future-agricultures.org](http://www.future-agricultures.org)) and involves more than 100 researchers and communications professionals in Africa, UK, Sweden and USA

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