



# THE POWER OF BLOGS TO SHARE RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATE POLICY LESSONS

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Over the course of the Agricultural Policy Research in Africa (APRA) Programme (2016-22), researchers produced over 150 publications, including Working Papers, Briefs, COVID-19 Papers, Journal Articles and several books.<sup>1</sup> The intended audience of these publications varied, from the academic community to national and regional policymakers and other stakeholders; but their value is multiplied when they engage a broader audience.

A key approach taken by APRA's Information, Communication and Engagement (ICE)<sup>2</sup> team to further the reach of these publications was to support the researchers in publishing weekly blogs. Ranging in length from 700 to 1,000 words, these blogs condensed the key insights and messages from longer, more technical publications, particularly highlighting valuable findings and policy takeaways, into a shorter, more accessible and relevant format. With over 200 blogs published since 2018, these outputs have proved highly valuable in promoting APRA publications and events, receiving multiple viewings from a diverse audience and leading to significant subsequent downloads of the related research outputs.

### **What did ICE do?**

As each output was finalised for publishing, a member of the ICE team reached out to the author(s) to request a blog to promote the research being published, and ICE support was provided in producing this content. Blogs are a valuable source of information as they enable researchers to take a more personal approach to their work; by allowing them to highlight the points they feel are most important and share their perspectives on the findings. Upon receipt of the author's draft, the ICE team reviewed and edited the blog to ensure it was well-written, easy to understand, and formatted consistently with previous blogs. When necessary, comments were added to request further explanation or clarification of certain details.

*'The ICE team were very persistent and supportive in getting blogs out of research teams'* – Adebayo Aromolaran, APRA Nigeria researcher

To enhance the impact of the text and provide a visual overview of its content, at least one image was included within each blog. Photos were provided by the authors where possible (or were otherwise sourced by the ICE team), and often depicted the team during various research stages, such as the data collection fieldwork undertaken with local communities.

Following a blog's publication on the APRA section of the Future Agriculture Consortium (FAC) [website](#), it was promoted on FAC's Twitter and Facebook pages – which have a combined audience of nearly 27,000 followers. This audience includes a wide array of individuals and organisations – many linked to the field of agricultural research – whose own followers were subsequently reached through their engagement with and sharing of the blogs. APRA authors were also able to share links to the blogs on their individual social media accounts, which provided an opportunity to promote and comment on their own research and engage directly in its reception.

During the APRA Programme, blogs regularly received over 1,000 unique page views, which represents the number of individuals who visited the webpage. Overall, the 210 blogs have received 105,000 views and represent 46% of all APRA page views. In addition, visitors' average viewing time is over four minutes, which indicates that visitors have read the content rather than skimming through it or opening the webpage and exiting quickly. Of the 20 most-visited webpages on the FAC website, blogs accounted for 13 – a significant proportion. Thus, it is fair to say the blogs played a critical role in raising awareness of the APRA Programme and encouraging exploration of other APRA publications, blogs, news items, and more.

In the last two years of APRA (2020-22), the publication of blogs developed to such an extent that their production constituted a significant portion of the ICE team's work. The APRA Coordination (management) Team felt this was worth the investment, even though blogs were not part of the official set of 'knowledge products' tracked in APRA's logframe, and therefore not formally assessed by APRA funders, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office.

### **What worked well?**

Developing blogs has been an invaluable learning tool for researchers. Not only has the process enabled them to explore ways to distil key messages, but it has allowed them to see how sharing their work in a more concise, accessible format ensures wide dissemination and enhanced engagement of their research.

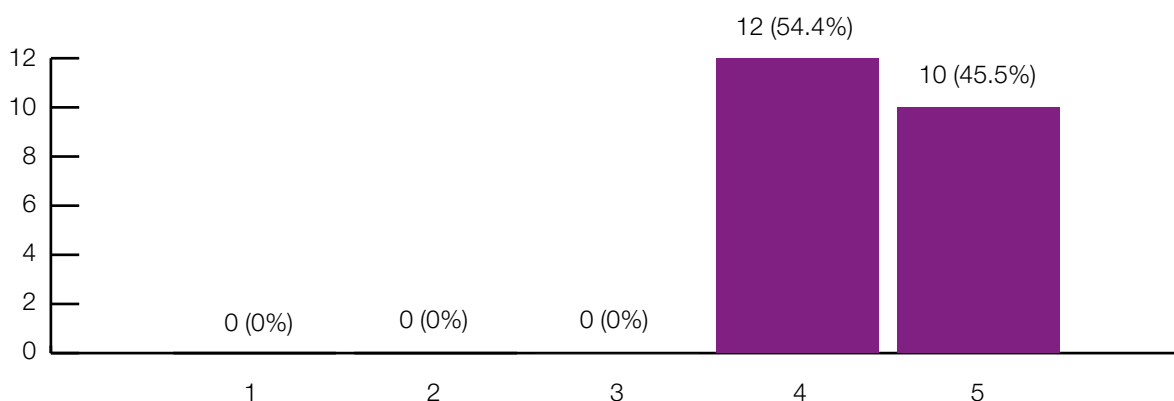
Whilst APRA researchers were initially resistant and rather reluctant to write blogs, at the end of the Programme, when they were asked to rate the importance/value of APRA blogs (from 1: not important, to 5: extremely important), all respondents valued them at a 4 or 5, with over 45% giving the highest rating of 5 (Figure 1).

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1 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 Agriculture Consortium. DOI: [10.19088/APRA.2022.028](#).

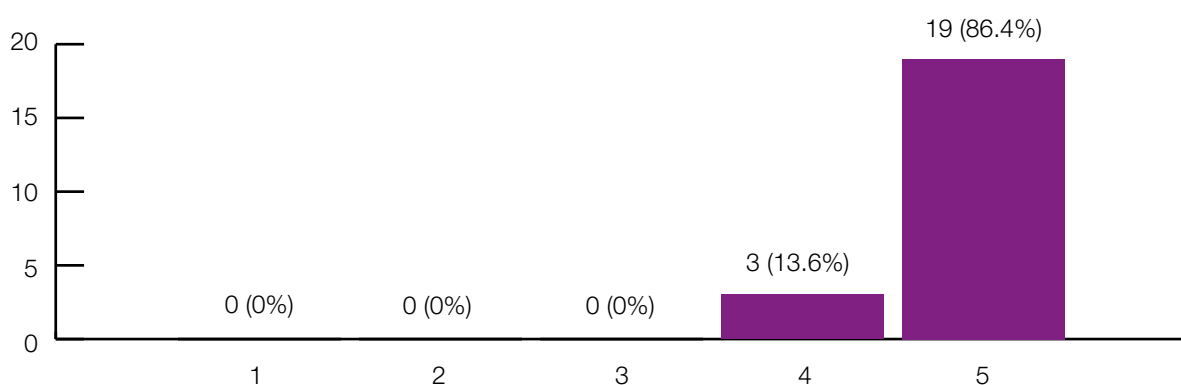
2 The ICE team is made up of members of [WRENmedia](#) staff, including its Director.

**Figure 1. APRA team responses to the ICE survey questionnaire on the importance of APRA blogs 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 blogs on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being very supportive and 1 not supportive**



Source: Authors' own.

These results highlight the researchers' acknowledgment that the effort invested in the blogs was worth their time, and that blogs are now viewed as valuable complementary outputs to the more conventional knowledge products. Further comments from publication authors supported this viewpoint, with researchers noting the value of blogs as a more succinct and widely relevant summation of their research.

*'Conciseness and brevity of ideas conveyed to the larger audience worked well'* – Kehinde Adesina Thomas, APRA Nigeria researcher

The process of producing the blogs in partnership with the ICE team was also highly valued. When APRA researchers were asked to rate the ICE team's support in helping produce blogs (again, from 1: not important, to 5: extremely important), over 86% gave the highest rating of 5 and the remaining 13.6% of researchers graded ICE support at 4 (Figure 2).

This collaborative process of reviewing and editing the blogs between the ICE team and the authors was deemed by APRA researchers as 'valuable', 'rigorous', and 'timely', and was highlighted as a successful part of the ICE team's work.

*'The ICE team's untiring support and even in reducing the blogs to an acceptable word count without losing the essence and main message in the blog has been phenomenal'* – Masautso Chimombo, APRA Malawi researcher

In summary, the blogs have facilitated a closer working relationship between the research teams and the ICE team, provided increased awareness of the APRA Programme and, perhaps most importantly, wider engagement with and comprehension of APRA research among a wider audience including academics, policymakers, and other interested stakeholders and individuals.

*'As someone who writes primarily for an academic audience, I received assistance to prepare blogs that were reader-friendly, succinct, but also conveyed the core message of the working paper'* – Kofi Takyi Asante, APRA Ghana researcher

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

Despite the success of APRA blogs, there is room for improvement. First, providing blog guidelines when these outputs were first introduced in 2018 would have helped to raise awareness about the



purpose and style of the content to researchers, so they understood what to include and leave out more quickly and independently. APRA researchers are used to providing a great deal of context and including all relevant statistics; so many found it difficult to narrow information down to only the key findings and policy implications, and to convey these in less academic terms. With additional training on how to write in a more simplistic way, the amount of time the ICE team and researchers spent revising blog drafts would have been reduced.

In addition, as is the case across a number of ICE activities, the lack of high-quality photos from research teams often made it challenging to include relevant and appealing photos with each article. Where research teams did have photos, they were frequently of insufficient quality, which meant the ICE team had to spend time searching for an appropriate generic photo. Encouraging the research teams to take more photos during their field work and providing equipment and/or training to improve the quality of any photos taken, would provide the ICE team with a useable bank of feature photographs from which they could draw. This would save time and ensure that included images are wholly relevant.

Supporting APRA researchers in developing a social media presence would also have improved the impact of blogs, as social media platforms provide a way for blog authors to communicate directly with their readers. In cases where researchers were active on social media, it was possible for them to respond to questions, elaborate on their key messages, and share the blogs with their own audiences to further their reach. However, many of the research teams did not have social media accounts and, thus, missed out on this valuable opportunity.

Other suggestions made by APRA researcher to improve the blogs include:

*'Need to make them downloadable in an attractive PDF layout'* – Dawit Alemu, APRA Ethiopia country lead

This is a good point, but one that was not possible with the web format. It should, however, be considered for another time.

*'Tagging opinion leaders with huge followings [in blog-related social media] for more policy influence'* – Hannington Odame, APRA regional coordinator for East Africa

## **Key lessons**

The primary message from the research teams' feedback is that blogs are a valuable and worthwhile endeavour. However, the most notable areas for improvement are: 1) providing more comprehensive guidelines and/or training on writing in a concise, reader-friendly, accessible format; 2) facilitating improved photography among research teams; and 3) increasing communication between ICE and research teams to better recognise and comply with respective requests.

**Providing blog training and guidelines:** Providing greater explanation to teams as to how to construct the blogs, could have reduced the amount of time and number of rounds of revision that went into each blog. This would have both improved the researchers' experience of drafting blogs and reduced the amount of time the ICE team spent supporting these revisions. For example, it often took research teams significant time and effort to truly understand that, in cases where research was presented in a blog, a hyperlink was provided to the original publication – thus allowing readers to find more details of the study design and data, if required. As a result, it was unnecessary to include such details in the blog.

**Training and guidance on taking photographs:** Facilitating improved photography among research teams would have ensured that all photographs used with blogs and corresponding social media gave a true representation of the teams and their research. The collection of strong photos by the teams could also have contributed to an APRA image database for future use.

**Enhanced social media opportunities:** Finally, increased communication between the ICE and research teams would have provided greater opportunities to implement requests and further promote blogs. For example, if the teams knew of a social media account that would have been valuable to engage with, they could have made the ICE team aware of it. Similarly, the ICE team could have supported the research teams with developing their social media presence or, in cases where the researchers wanted a copy of the blog in a different format for dissemination purposes, they could have communicated that request.

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