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Between complexity and unpredictability: how can the intervention frameworks for agricultural action research be revised?

KEY MESSAGES

- **Agricultural research for development is undergoing a twofold evolution: endogenous**, through the increase in the number and complexity of projects under the impetus of donors; and **exogenous**, through the increase in unpredictability caused by the growing frequency of crisis events.
- **Logical frameworks**, which have become inadequate, **would benefit from integrating parameters of shock and rupture**, providing greater flexibility in the operational management of projects and including a review clause in their intervention plans to deal with unforeseen events.
- To ensure the projects have impact, **donors could integrate planning for the dissemination and scaling up of innovations from their design stage and provide ex post monitoring** to assess the scope of these measures.

NEWS PROJECTS ARE CHALLENGED BY A CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZED CRISES

Under the impetus of donors, agricultural research for development projects are increasing in size, marking the emergence of a new type of project such as the DeSIRA initiative¹ launched by the European Commission. Characterized by a new research approach, the DeSIRA projects implemented in the Sahel² are part of a multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder, participatory and gender-inclusive approach. They promote the co-construction of innovations with beneficiaries placed at the heart of the innovation process.

However, the expansion of projects goes hand in hand with an increase in the number and diversity of partners, with heterogeneous skills and disciplines, as well as a tendency towards the dispersion of the resources allocated to each of them. This results in a high level of organizational and scientific complexity, making it a real challenge for the projects to meet the requirements of their research approach.

These new projects are part of an increasingly unpredictable global context, marked not only by climate change, but also by other crises such as the increase in insecurity in the Sahel. Impacted by these imponderables, they are now experiencing delays – sometimes lengthy ones – in the implementation of their activities.

1. Launched at the One Planet Summit in Paris in 2017, the DeSIRA initiative (Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture) is funding more than 60 projects around the world to promote innovation in agriculture and the transformation of partner countries' food systems to make them more resilient to the effects of climate change.

2. These projects are : ABEE, ACCEP, APSAN, BIOSAR, CASSECS, FAIR, INV-Niger, IRRINN and S&T.

EXAMPLES OF DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY DESIRAS IN THE SAHEL

Organisational complexity	<p>> Impact of increasing and diversifying the number of partners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in procedures and complexity of coordination • Difficulty to communicate between hubs, to relay information and thus to ensure the monitoring of the programs • Informational asymmetry between projects partners and confusion over the terminology used
Scientific complexity	<p>> Difficulties in meeting donors' requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty defining themes in a co-design approach while having to describe activities upstream to justify budget allocations • Lack of skills or gender specialists to integrate this dimension into all project components and thus meet the indicators • Difficulty to validate and harmonise multi-site data and lack of resources to do so
Unpredictability of the context	<p>> Health crisis : impact of restrictions on travel by researchers and meetings between project actors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays in operational implementation due to postponement of kick offs and lack of access to the field • Obstacles to co-construction due to the absence of methodology carriers and the difficulty of meetings <p>> Security crisis : impact of increased insecurity in the Sahel region:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervention sites changed to smaller areas already "overgrazed" by other projects • Need for escorts for field work without the associated security budget

INADEQUATE INTERVENTION FRAMEWORKS

This twofold evolution, both endogenous and exogenous, results in numerous obstacles (see table above) that the projects are trying to address. However, they remain dependent on development intervention approaches, which need to be adapted to the specificities of research.

In the case of the DeSIRA projects implemented in the Sahel, travel restrictions in response to the pandemic and to insecurity were offset by increased intervention planning via videoconferencing. However, this does not resolve the problem of the difficulty of coordinating a large number of partners.

Although the methods for designing and assessing projects have changed, now focusing less on normative precepts and more on achieving impact, some

expectations still reflect the conventional development framework. Thus, the DeSIRAs experience difficulty in filling in certain indicators in practice, such as the "gender" component, due to the skills and resources required. The measurement of their impact according to a system that is not specifically adapted to the action research field is a notorious point of interest.

PROPOSALS FROM FIELD ACTORS

In view of the increasingly uncertain global context, the DeSIRA project actors suggest that the **parameters of shock, rupture and insecurity be integrated into the logical frameworks of projects**, through the use of scenarios, for example. They would also like to **have more flexibility in the financial and operational management of projects**, with a



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review clause for the intervention frameworks to effectively adapt to unforeseen events.

Sharing the same research approach and facing the same complexity, these actors would like **project synergies to be planned from their design stage**, with specifically dedicated activities, or included in cross-cutting capitalization initiatives such as DISSEM-INN (see box p. 4 for more information).

Furthermore, the requirement of **gender inclusiveness** would require a **better formalization of concrete expectations** and corresponding activities in the logical frameworks. An operational strategy in this area would be to provide for a **specific budget** including the recruitment of skills and training for the project team, to ensure “gender” is properly integrated into all aspects of the project.

AVENUES TO EXPLORE FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

DeSIRA projects have the particularity of being aimed at the dissemination and scaling up of their innovations. Donors have a key role to play in integrating feedback from the first DeSIRA projects as they consider the launch of new initiatives.

These future projects will need to be developed according to an inclusive approach, incorporating from their design stage activities dedicated to their adoption and scaling up. To ensure greater impact, this approach must simultaneously focus on three dimensions: a physical and technical



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dimension (hardware); a process-based dimension associated with positions and practices (software); and a dimension focusing on organizational modes (orgware), as technological innovations alone have shown their limitations in terms of long-term impact.

Moreover, it seems important to be able to **anticipate the sustainability of the changes induced by the projects by planning from the outset complementary investments for this purpose and by identifying relevant operators to implement them**, for example the government departments specializing in outreach or agricultural extension, such as ANCAR³ in Senegal.

This also requires an additional focus on an **ex post project monitoring system to assess the extent of adoption and scaling up of the innovations deployed**, with a view to improving practices.

3. National Agricultural and Rural Advisory Agency (ANCAR), Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Equipment (MAER)



Photo credit: see the regional exchange workshop Report, page 125.

CASE STUDY

This policy brief is based on the findings of a regional exchange workshop organized by the “Dissemination of Innovations in the Sahel (DISSEM-INN)” project, which can be found in its report and summary note. Funded by AFD and coordinated by CIRAD, DISSEM-INN concerns a set of nine projects launched as part of the European DeSIRA initiative and implemented in the Sahel. These projects contribute to developing sustainable, climate-resilient agri-food systems by focusing on innovation processes. DISSEM-INN aims to capitalize on their practices and, to achieve this, proposes that they collectively reflect on the scaling up of their innovations.

SOURCES

- Report of the regional exchange workshop, 2022, DISSEM-INN

FOR MORE INFORMATION

<https://www.dissem-inn.org/ressources/production>

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About CIRAD

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