BETWEEN OPPORTUNITIES AND ADVERSITY: FROM THE CHALLENGES TO THE IMPLEMENTATION OF DESIRAS IN THE SAHEL

Briefing note of the regional exchange workshop –10 to 12 May 2022 – Mbour (Senegal)

Funded by **AFD** and coordinated by **Cirad**, the project "Dissemination of innovations in the Sahel region (**DISSEM-INN**)" concerns a set of **nine projects** launched under the European DeSIRA initiative and implemented in the Sahel region. These projects contribute to the development of sustainable, climate-resilient agri-food systems by focusing on innovation processes, each in a specific field. DISSEM-INN aims to capitalise on the practices of these nine projects and invites them to collectively reflect on how to roll out their innovations. To this end, **a regional exchange workshop** was held in May 2022 at the Saly Hotel in Mbour (Senegal). It was the subject of a detailed report, the key points of which are set out in this summary.

The perspective chosen to ensure a cross-sectional analysis of these nine projects was to take as a starting point their integration as DeSIRA projects in a shared **approach known as "Development Smart Innovation" (DeSI),** by identifying the way in which they implement their research processes. These approaches to innovation were analysed using a **framework distinguishing between three dimensions:** physical and technical (**hardware**); positions and practices (**software**); and modes of organisation (**orgware**). The findings of the report show that the shared characteristics of the nine projects are not so much specific to DeSIRA projects as to a new type of project emerging from the same set of underlying factors (I), sharing the same research process (II) and aiming to sustain their innovations over time (III).

The DeSIRAs, revealing the emergence of a new type of project cycle

The DeSIRA initiative marks a **dramatic increase in project size,** driven by donors. This has led to **an increase in the number of partners involved and their diversification.** Consequently, in order to meet the requirements of partnership dynamics and interdisciplinarity, the projects are faced with **complexity on two levels, both scientific and organizational.** This results in a situation of informational asymmetry, between partners with diverse knowledge, skills and disciplines, which poses a real methodological challenge for the collective construction of knowledge. Coordinating all of these different actors is also complex, especially since their greater concentration in number results in a wider dispersion of the resources allocated to each of them.

>> ABOUT THE DESIRA INITIATIVE

Launched at the One Planet Summit in Paris in 2017, the **DeSIRA initiative** is supported by the European Commission Directorate for International Partnerships (DG INTPA). Funding more than 60 projects worldwide, this programme aims to promote innovation in agriculture and the transformation of partner countries' agri-food systems to make them more resilient to the effects of climate

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1. These projects are: ABEE, ACCEPT, APSAN-Mali, BIOSTAR, CASSECS, FAIR Sahel, INV-Niger, IRRINN, Health & Territories.

To address this complexity, the DeSIRAs involved chose to start from what already exists by **ensuring maximum capitalization on previous work and ongoing innovations.** They advocated a **decentralized rotating governance model,** building on existing networks and bridging the gap between the work packages. According to them, the different partners, divided into thematic interinstitutional groups, would work together more easily if the project coordination organized beforehand a **workshop on transdisciplinary and the establishment of a common terminology.the establishment of a common terminology.**

The nine projects launched from 2019 onwards have been **impacted by the global health crisis,** which has delayed their progress and restricted meetings between scientific disciplinary fields and access on the ground. Since they all operate in the Sahel, most of them are experiencing the **repercussions of increased insecurity in the area,** to the extent that some have changed the location of their operations. They thus reflect the **emergence of a new type of project with greater scope**, implemented in a context of **more frequent crisis events.**

Faced with these challenges, the report's findings point out that future projects could benefit from **integrating parameters of disruption, shock and insecurity into their logical frameworks and budget lines,** via scenario planning, for example. Operationalizing the DeSIRAs also seems to require **more leeway** in managing their funding and defining their planning through a **review clause** that would allow them to make the necessary adjustments as needed. For example, the **transfer of skills to partners better equipped to intervene in areas under stress** is one option, through *mandating* and contracting with specialized bodies. In the meantime, the projects could **benefit from a closer relationship with donors,** through regular meetings in order to facilitate the management of potential contingencies.

Fig. 1 - Word cloud

Source : created with www.nuagesdemots.fr

The DeSI approach, illustrating a renewal in the research process

The nine projects are part of a common research approach that is **multidisciplinary, integrated and places the direct beneficiaries at the heart of the innovation process.** It is based on the **principle of co-construction,** which takes into account the opinions of all actors in all phases of the project, going as far as reorienting the research if necessary. It also builds on the **principle of participatory action research,** based on experiments carried out on a local basis with the recipients **with a view to supporting them and** changing practices.

The understanding of these principles shared by all the DeSIRAs is illustrated by the word cloud above (Fig. 1), which reflects the frequency of the terms used the most by the focal points to describe their research approach during bilateral interviews conducted by DISSEM-INN.

This approach is also intended to be integrated in terms of *"gender"* , which is why, in the Sahel, the DeSIRAs have **prioritized women and young people through indicators** to ensure that they benefit from equity measures in all aspects of the project. Gender mainstreaming sometimes remains problematic, because the DeSIRAs **lack the necessary skills and associated budget lines** to implement real measures at the operational level.

The collective perception of the *"gender"* issue is that it would be more effective if the projects **benefited** from **training and skills from the outset to ensure gender mainstreaming in all the aspects of the project, with a dedicated budget for this purpose.** Moreover, efforts to further formalize actual expectations in terms of gender activities in the logical frameworks seems to be an avenue to explore.

The projects encounter certain difficulties in consolidating a trust-based relationship with the beneficiaries. In practice, their **support** remains **dependent on a rather top-down logic** that limits reciprocal learning, including on the approach adopted.

To overcome these obstacles, the projects indicate that **more time** should be given **to field immersion and to listening to recipients,** in order to communicate more clearly with them on the objectives of the project and to start from the inventory of their suggestions. In addition, the targeting of legitimate partners (institutional and community) should facilitate the process of co-construction and appropriation.

To better associate producers with all partners throughout the process, the DeSIRAs have opted for the notion of a **platform**, defined as *"a framework for exchange, consultation, circulation and dissemination of information"*. Through its **multi-stakeholder dimension,** the platform **meets the double requirement of the participatory co-construction of knowledge.** This multiform notion covers various modalities, but **brings together the three dimensions of innovation,** through the content of its exchanges,

centered on *hardware*, its mode of collective work, based on *software*, and its very composition, specific to *orgware*.

These research principles shared by the DeSIRAs, which seem to characterize the DeSI approach, attest to a **change in mentality and practices in terms of agricultural research for development,** which is promising since it **aims to have an overall impact** by sustaining the innovations and transformations that the projects generate..

The challenge of sustaining DeSIs

Communication is the **primary means of promoting the innovations** resulting from the DeSIRAs, in their three dimensions. By informing the world of international agricultural cooperation, it enables **better integration of the scientific results** obtained (*hardware*) **in the field actions** of the projects, thus contributing to strengthening the research-development continuum. It also represents a **tool for changing mentalities** (*software*) by transmitting the project's key messages in a way that is adapted to its different targets, such as promoting agroecology to decision-makers, for instance. By specifically addressing the community of actors engaged in the sustainable agri-food transition in the Sahel, it helps to **federate** its members (*orgware*) **and to reveal potential synergies** for joint actions.

The DeSIRAs have thus chosen **communication** as a **strategic priority to ensure the adoption** of innovations,

understood as the transition from the dissemination of practices at the level of the project's direct targets to that of its indirect beneficiaries. The goal is to communicate on success stories, but also on failures and lessons learned from experiments by mobilizing several media: through the regular coordination of virtual information platforms; through the organization of fairs and cross visits, and through participation in national, regional and even international conferences.

To guarantee the sustainability of the changes made in terms of hardware, software and orgware, the projects concerned are aware of the need to start thinking now about **upscaling** strategies. Although this task is not within the remit of research, the projects nevertheless have the possibility to *"prepare the ground"* by identifying the measures and investments necessary for the **establishment of a comprehensive environment around innovation conducive to its deployment.**

The consultation frameworks have proven to be the **main tool** in this respect, as they enable windows of opportunity to be seized at different levels by benefiting from the **institutional support** for a project when its set up has been driven by a government or multi-stakeholder consortium. If appropriate, it is possible to **associate with partners who have a broader reach** or influence in decision-making spheres, such as sub-regional networks or institutions. Based on the example of these DeSIRAs, the table above (Fig. 2) shows how projects can mobilize this tool to promote their innovations.

Figure 2: Table of strategies for mobilizing collaborative frameworks considered by DeSIRA projects for scaling up.

DeSIRA projects	MOBILIZATION OF CONSULTATION FRAMEWORKS
ABEE	Strengthening of the **"dP IAVAO"** network at the regional level for the sharing of genetic information
ACCEPT	Political support for the project by the **Chad Pastoral Platform** within decision-making spheres
APSAN	Mobilization of the World Food Programme **(WFP)** in Mali to promote innovations
BIOSTAR	Creation of a multi-stakeholder consultation framework (research, teaching, professional training, sectors)
CASSECS	Mobilization of the **"dP PPZS"** network and its entries in various strategic organizations
FAIR	• Constitution of a network of actors involved in agroecology through a mapping excercise • Mobilization of the Senegalese national **"DyTAES"** consortium
INV-Niger	Mobilization of the multi-stakeholder consortium formed at the outset of the project and coordinated by the Nigerien government for institutional support for the project
IRRINN	• Mobilization of the project's network of partners • Mobilization of the exchange framework with the broader **"PARIIS"** project
S&T	• Mobilization of the network of the "La Ruche" work package (consisting in developing synergy between case studies and interventions conducted in similar areas and on similar themes) • Institutional support for the project by the metaliving lab as an arena for consultation at the scale of the related territory in connection with local living labs

A challenge remains in measuring the scope of the actions carried out in terms of both communication and scaling up, which could be monitored ex post by the donor to demonstrate their efficiency or to identify areas of improvement.

The DISSEM-INN project, through the organization of this first regional workshop, has set itself the task of *"enhancing the learnings and providing thoughts and avenues that are useful to others"* (De Zutter, 1994). The projects concerned have established **strong synergies in terms of approach,** which they could exploit. DISSEM-INN has developed a **map,** to be found as a supplement to the report, which provides a **global overview of the innovation approaches and strategies for adoption and scaling up** of these projects. It thus constitutes a source of information on the range of measures that can potentially be mobilized, to be adjusted by each project in the lights of its context in order to best plan the valorization of its results.

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To find out more

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About CIRAD

CIRAD is the French agricultural research and international cooperation centre for the sustainable development of tropical and Mediterranean regions. With its partners, it co-constructs knowledge and solutions for resilient agriculture in a more sustainable and inclusive world.