Learning from Agricultural Research for Development (AR4D) programs in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Food Security: a global problem deeper in SSA

- Globally 870 million people still chronically undernourished in 2010–12.
- The vast majority live in developing countries.
- In most countries of Sub Saharan Africa, the prevalence of undernourishment ranges from moderately high to very high.
Research investment

• There is a long history of investment in agriculture research for development in Africa to promote food security and enhance livelihoods.

• However, donors, researchers, development agencies and practitioners often do not have ready access to high quality information about what works, in which settings and with and for whom.
The Australian funded project Food System Innovation for Food Security (FSIFS) was established to investigate the effective application of science and evidence-based approaches to the development, implementation and evaluation of food security interventions.

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA): one of the focal areas.

Collect and integrate knowledge from previous food security interventions in SSA to enhance the design of new Australian investments in the region.

Data set included extensive written material from 7 SSA based projects, as well as 27 interviews from respondents affiliated with 14 different organizations including multilateral, donors, development agencies, NARS, and NGOs operating in Africa.
Unlike data mining and systematic review which rely entirely on published data, we developed an integrative approach to use both published data and expert knowledge to derive an initial sets of good practices and their counterviews within a given domain of interest, in our case food security interventions.

The food security literature is rich in a series of “lessons learned” that in most cases are built on generalities or well-known management principles rather than evidence based. We have identified that those lessons learned could be included in three categories Axioms, Propositions and Observations, based on their robustness, their applicability and their novelty as shown in Table 1.
Table 1. Concepts used in the process of defining propositions for debate and discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Axioms</strong> – (close to) self evident truth</td>
<td>e.g. Stakeholder participation is critical for sustained project impacts</td>
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<td><strong>Propositions</strong> – proposals on best practice that have a solid evidence base but remain contested</td>
<td>e.g. Projects using Innovation Platforms to improve food security should be designed to run for longer than four years</td>
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<td><strong>Observations</strong> – things that stand out from review of evidence but where implications are unclear</td>
<td>In the sub-Saharan African Challenge Program establishing operational Innovation Platforms often took more than half the planned project life</td>
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Approach

• The set of lessons learned is then critically reviewed, discussed, debated, and supported or challenged by evidence coming from participatory processes involving a broader community of interest.

• These processes create ownership, encourage the use and refine of the information and facilitate social learning.
Focus on Propositions

- The analysis of information captured a large number of observations single data points with weak evidence, a smaller number of axioms based on well-known principles that are generally already included in the design of food security projects, and a short number of Propositions corresponding to issues where there is solid evidence, but few counterviews are also available, opening the door for context analysis, discussion, debate and further research.
Information on each proposition

Statement of the Proposition
- A single sentence statement of best practice about an aspect of food security interventions in Africa

Explanation
- Single paragraph expansion on the proposition

Evidence
- Summary data and references supporting the proposition derived from interviews about the projects analysed and documented material accessed

Example(s)
- Narrative from case study project illustrating the proposition

Food security consequences
- Hypothesised consequences of the proposition for food security outcomes

Project design considerations
- Implications of the proposition for project design in AR4D / development interventions

Assumptions and their implications
- Assumptions causality, assumptions about strength of evidence, assumptions about scaleability and context etc

Counterviews and their implications
- Other experience suggesting different conclusions
The set of propositions was tested three times in a participatory manner to refine its content and structure during May-June 2013 involving a different set of users and target audiences.

This process promotes ownership and ensures that the product will be useful and fulfil the expectations of donors, researchers, practitioners and beneficiaries.

The set of propositions was scrutinized from the donor perspective by AusAID’s, later examined from the researchers perspective by a group of ACIAR staff, and finally presented in Nairobi to a group of African practitioners and experienced researchers working in Africa with positive feedback.

The propositions are now a corner stone of new Australian funded initiatives in SSA.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

• A set of propositions for discussion and debate about contentious issues for the design food security projects in SSA was developed, following a consistent methodological approach based on data collected from 6 major programs.

• The aim of the proposition is to provide a platform for discussion and debate rather than a fixed set of “lessons learned”

• The content and structure of the propositions was discussed and examined by a broad community of practices and they are currently used by CSIRO and AUSAID for the design of new Australian food security projects in Africa.
Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to the individuals who gave up their time to be interviewed providing the data source from which the propositions evolved. The wealth of insights and generosity of time in relaying their experience to us is acknowledged with sincere gratitude.

The propositions were tested at several venues including in Canberra at the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and in Nairobi at the International Workshop on Agricultural Innovation Systems in Africa and we thank the event organisers for inviting us to explore with the audiences the concept and potential value of the propositions.

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