

ERA-ARD Briefing Paper

Monitoring and Evaluation

Briefing by Monica Berti, Istituto Agronomico per l'Oltremare (IAO), Italy

Background

For developing countries, agriculture is crucial for economic growth, through its role in food security, and in addressing global issues such as bio-energy, climate change, etc. Agricultural Research for Development (ARD) responds to the needs to feed growing populations and to drive economic growth in a sustainable manner.

The second phase of ERA-ARD is a € 1 million European Research Area Network (ERA-Net) project funded under the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme from 2010 to 2013. The project is a partnership of 17 organisations involved with funding agricultural research for development in 15 European countries. ERA-ARD aims to improve ARD coordination between national research programmes and promote collaboration in European agricultural research for the world's poor.

ERA-ARD briefing papers are made available widely to sensitize the European population to the critical importance of ARD and that its results and impact are not limited to "outside Europe" but also have direct benefits for "within Europe". The achievements of ERA-ARD are documented and made available through its website www.era-ard.org, to benefit both stakeholders and the wider public.

Disclaimer

The views presented in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of EC.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Abstract

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) should be understood as a tool to provide credible and useful information, rather than perceived as an inspection or control. M&E plays an important role in projects through the collection and analysis of information as well as the dissemination of lessons learned into the decision-making process of both recipients and donors. It helps keeping partners and stakeholders informed about project progress, so that they can update plans and improve management by remedial actions if necessary.

ERA-ARD endeavours to establish a harmonised research vision while improving coordination at the political level (among ministries/national decision makers) and strengthening coherence among funders. It aims towards effective horizontal and vertical integration, establishing linkages across the different agricultural research providers.

One of the ERA-ARD project Work Packages (WPs) concerns “Strategic activities towards joint programming”. It has strong interconnections with the other WPs and essentially seeks to promote a change of behaviour at different levels: from the individual collaborators up to the policy levels, including programme and project levels, in the public and in the private sector.

To review such a strategic WP, a theory of change diagram was drafted, based on a shared understanding of the WP logic as expressed in the official project Description of Work (DoW). A diagram enables easier perception and understanding of both objectives and assumptions that support this theory.

Because monitoring provides a transparent and credible frame for assessing the rate of progress, it encourages drawing lessons to promote further improvement or to re-shape and fine-tune planned activities. In the case of a theory of change, the logic of the impact pathway might also be re-visited and assumptions or the links between outputs, outcomes and impact adjusted.

List of acronyms

Acronym	Description
AR	Agricultural Research
ARD	Agricultural Research for Development
DoW	Description of Work
ERA	European Research Area
IAO	Istituto Agronomico per l’Oltremare Agricultural Overseas Institute
IAR	International Agricultural Research
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
OECD-DAC	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development - Development Assistance Committee
WP	Work Package

Monitoring and Evaluation plan

ERA-ARD strategic activities towards joint programming

The challenge for ERA-ARD is to harmonise very different needs, human resources, financial means and already established ways of programming ARD at national and European level. Although the broad objective of poverty eradication and environmental sustainability is common to respond to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the overall European funding landscape shows fragmentation and lack of synergies and cooperation.

Within the second project phase of ERA-ARD, six WPs are defined to tackle the challenge of improving the ARD programming by the different decision-makers. The WP concerning “Strategic activities towards joint programming” represents the backbone of this conceptual project as it seeks to encourage a change of behaviour at different levels: from the individual collaborators up to the policy levels, including programme and project levels, in the public sector as well as in the private sector. It tries to promote a common approach at national level in each member country but also to encourage a European dimension of ARD, through a network of relations and the reinforcement of its impact at global level.

Within this context, the objectives of this strategic WP are:

1. To ensure that all ERA-ARD activities are based on an understanding of needs of Southern beneficiaries.
2. To improve the dialogue between the different decision-makers involved in agricultural research at the European country level.
3. To improve ARD/AR coordination mechanisms at the European level.
4. To develop the European contribution to the International Agricultural Research (IAR) agenda and MDGs.

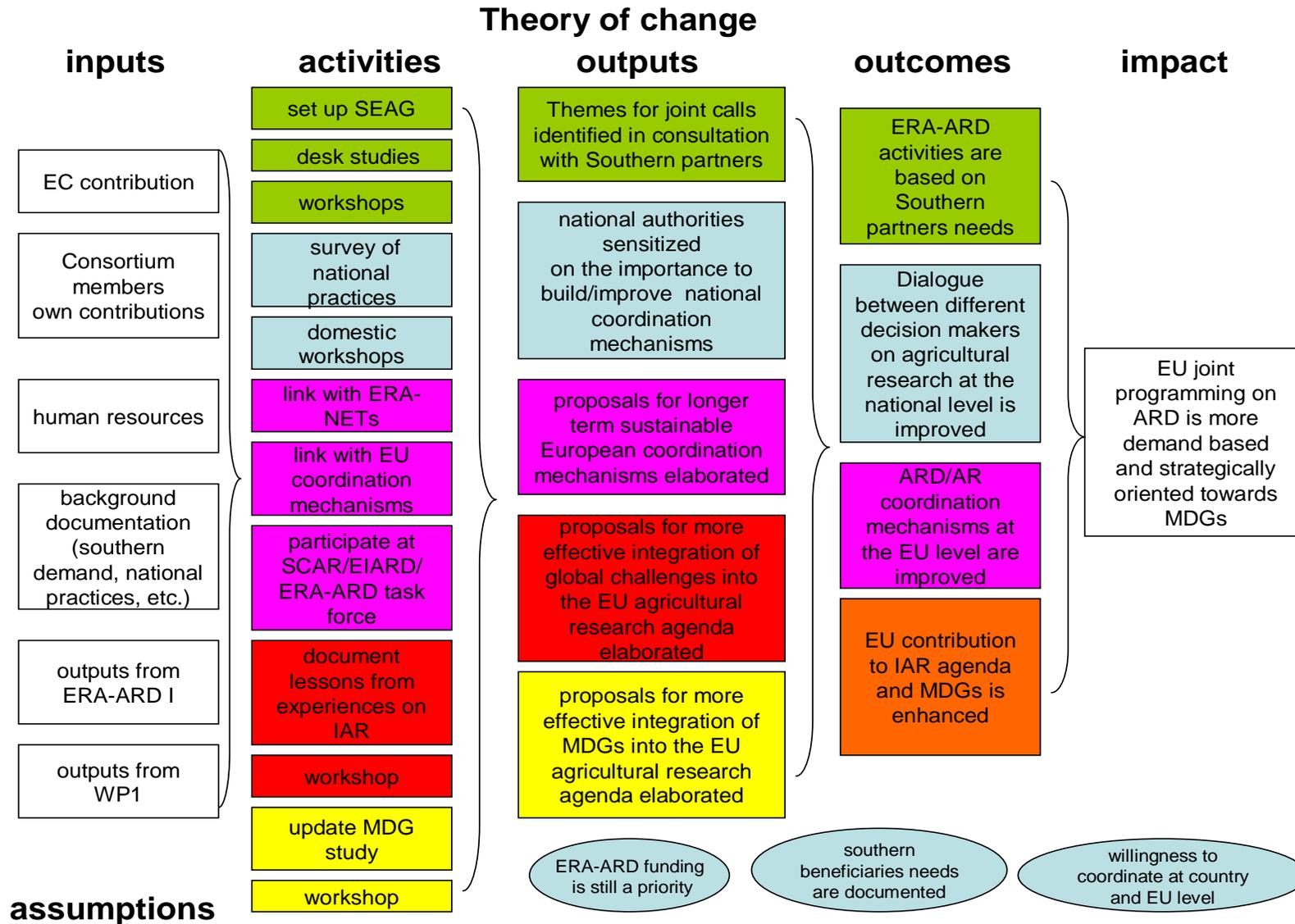
After understanding and interpreting the official description of ERA-ARD’s strategic activities towards joint programming, a theory of change was elaborated and structured according to the impact chain (inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact). Its logic is represented in the Figure 1, which enables a shared comprehension among the involved partners right from the beginning of the project.

The challenge is to modify the perception and behaviour of national stakeholders involved with ARD and to scale it up to European level, even though it influences different interlinked sectors such as research, agriculture, development, knowledge dissemination and empowerment.

In a process of change, quality counts more than quantity. Therefore, the assessment focuses on the type (technical, management...), level (operational, directive, adviser...), trend (top down or vice versa), dissemination (within or out of the institution) of the behavioural change of project partners and boundary partners. Moreover the changes (in behaviour, in proposals, in acceptance of new ideas...) cannot be measured but analysed only through the perception and judgements expressed by involved persons or associates.

The potential impact of the relevant WP activities can be commented on and appreciated by persons and bodies external to ERA-ARD who are aware of its strategic objectives or that have been reached by some of the accomplishments.

Figure 1



The proposed data collection tools include studies, surveys and interviews, designed to assess the most relevant aspects of the process of behavioural change. Data analysis will provide indications that can help understanding whether ERA-ARD achieves the expected outcomes and impact, and thus provides added value to European efforts to influence the MDGs and tackle the global challenges.

The baseline from where the changes are considered and measured, in quantity and quality, should be set at the beginning of the second phase of ERA-ARD, i.e. October 2010. This represents the achievements of the first phase of ERA-ARD, which have been analysed through a factual overview.

Assumptions

ARD is research which addresses the agricultural challenges and issues faced by developing countries, emerging countries and countries in transition. Research, in this context, should be understood as an activity in which knowledge is not only produced but also shared, through an interactive learning process based on capacity building.

Right from the DoW elaboration appears the consensus on ARD being focussed on a demand-driven and holistic approach and well embedded in the MDGs (reducing poverty, ensuring environmental sustainability, creating partnerships for development).

As one of the objectives of the project is to make European Agricultural Research and education for development programmes more responsive to the Southern partners' needs, the related assumptions are:

- Southern and emerging countries have identified and expressed their needs in agricultural research and are willing to create alliances
- ERA-ARD country members are interested in addressing Southern needs in a common search of improved, environmentally sustainable systems

Another objective is to deepen the mutual knowledge of national ARD and the European Commission programmes and their governance. This brings a new assumption:

- European member states are committed to agricultural research and willing to promote collaborative partnership among ARD structures

The final assumption is derived from the objectives to expand joint activities taking into account the impacts on climate change and their contribution to the global food security and to communicate and disseminate on the European ARD contribution to MDGs:

- The European AR agenda does take into account societal issues and is human well-being focused, with a growing attention to the MDGs and global challenges

These assumptions expressed in the background of the WP under review must be carefully taken into account and validated throughout M&E activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The challenges of the WP under review are substantial considering the relatively short lifespan of the project, although they are part of a broad internationally evolving context. The reviewed WP activities and deliverables are outputs that are assessable through the project portal (www.era-ard.org) whereas the outcomes are often qualitative changes of behaviour based on acceptance of new paradigms and different logics. The M&E should review the outcomes rather than the outputs and become a collective action through triangulation of information.

Although “Monitoring” and “Evaluation” are tightly linked, there are some differences between them concerning the level of intervention, time and responsibility.

Monitoring is a continuous process allowing all parties to be aware of progress and difficulties (if any) in achieving the set objectives. It represents an opportunity for collective reflection, dissemination of good practices and for learning how risks were managed or some unintended outcomes were reached.

Evaluation questions “*Are we doing the right things?*” “*Are we doing things properly?*” “*Are we doing the better things?*” seek to gauge the efficiency, effectiveness, relevance, impact and sustainability of the activity. This procedure takes place at a particular time, i.e when delivering a milestone or at the end of the project. Evaluation usually includes external input to provide objectivity in the analysis of these five criteria proposed by the OECD-DAC for development project evaluation.

In the impact chain, outputs relate to the completion of activities over which partners have a high degree of control. Their quantity and quality might be easily assessed through the circulating documents and the project portal. Outcomes concern more the conduct of activities and correspond to a change of behaviour of a target population, linked with social, economic and political environment. They are less easy to monitor as they often consist in qualitative changes that have to be perceived by those who live or feel their fall out. Moreover, outcomes undergo the confusing effect (positive and negative) of other changes taking place at their scale.

The ultimate positive/negative, direct/indirect consequences at a broader dimension shape the impact, the expected one for these strategic activities is a contribution to the scaling up to European level of the modified perception and behaviour of national stakeholders involved in Agricultural Research for Development.

Follow-up

The ERA-ARD consortium partners would like to invite feedback and further discussion of the proposed step-wise approach. Please contact Monica Berti at berti.m@iao.florence.it (ERA-ARD Monitoring and Evaluation briefing author) and/or Sander van Opstal (ERA-ARD coordinator) at A.J.F.M.vanOpstal@mineleni.nl.

Quotation

Berti, M. (2013) Monitoring and evaluation. ERA-ARD briefing paper (<http://www.era-ard.org/outputs/phase-ii/>) - 6 pp.