Final Evaluation of the Food & Business Applied Research Fund (ARF)

Final Evaluation Report – Executive Summary
June 2019
NWO-WOTRO

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Executive Summary

Background

The global food system today is beset by serious challenges and risks. Major demographic shifts are increasing and changing the demand for food, with a rapidly growing population expected to reach 9.5 billion people by 2050 and drive global demand for food up by 60%. These shifts are driving new threats to populations, systems and environment. At the same time, some 795 million people go hungry every day, with 2 billion people lacking the nutrients to live a healthy life.

These challenges are systemic and interconnected, driven by the actions and interactions of many diverse actors across the food system. Such large-scale, complex challenges require scientific research and innovations to develop solutions that contribute to long-term access to affordable, safe and nutritious food for vulnerable and resource-poor populations. Moreover, these solutions have to be readily applicable and contribute to the enhancement of sustainable food security for these most vulnerable populations.

Against this background, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs developed a new knowledge and research policy in 2011 that should strengthen Dutch development policy and its implementation, as well as contribute to development and self-reliance in developing countries. To this end five knowledge platforms were established for the four thematic priority areas – food security being one among them – where learning can take place, as well as discussions on the knowledge agenda, a coherent research agenda and the utilisation of existing knowledge.

The main instruments to generate this new knowledge for the platform on food security are the Applied Research Fund (ARF) and the Global Food Challenges Programme (GCP). Both instruments aim at having an impact on food security in order to improve the situation of food insecure populations in developing countries and to generate research findings as well as innovative solutions that are relevant for development policy in the domain of food security and the challenges the global food system is facing today.

Purpose of the Final Evaluation of ARF

The ARF instrument possesses a monitoring and evaluation framework in which a baseline study, a mid-term and final evaluations have been carried out. NWO-WOTRO commissioned Syspons GmbH to implement this framework. In this regard Syspons assessed the contribution of ARF to food security and private sector development in Dutch partner countries. The objective of this evaluation and monitoring framework is also to account for public expenditure and to contribute towards future policy development and implementation.

For this final evaluation of ARF, Syspons was asked to deliver insights into the aspects of effectiveness, impact, and sustainability concerning ARF. Furthermore, the final evaluation’s aim is to provide recommendations for the future implementation of ARF or the design of future research-based food security instruments. The final evaluation focused on finalised or almost finalised ARF projects. This final evaluation report therefore complements the mid-term evaluation report. As such, a synthesis report of both will be submitted in 2021 together with the synthesis report of GCP.

The final evaluation was undertaken from June 2018 to June 2019. Within the given timeframe the evaluation team conducted an in-depth analysis of all relevant documents and data (e.g. project reports), an online survey among all consortia members as well as three case studies in Ghana, Uganda and Benin in which nine ARF projects from the first and second ARF call for proposals were analysed.

Key Findings and Conclusions

One of the strengths of the ARF programme is that it is largely effective, meaning that most outcomes are reached across the programme. For example, the evaluation finds that farmers and other producers adopt and apply new knowledge and innovation. This outcome was observed in the three case study countries Benin, Ghana and Uganda. Furthermore, the evaluation finds that the programme is successful in raising awareness for the food security issues that are being researched. For example, a project in
Benin demonstrated that communicating the research outputs in formats specifically adapted to the target groups can lead to high acceptance of research findings. Moreover, the evaluation finds that the ARF programme has been successful in fostering collaboration between Northern and Southern researchers. For this success, the ARF programme design, which requires teamwork and co-creation between Northern and Southern consortium members was key. In addition, the results show that it is possible to develop business models and value chains in inclusive ways, as was assumed in calls for proposal.

Overall, the evaluation finds that the main design features of the Food and Business Applied Research Fund are a main source of success of the programme, as they are instrumental for ensuring its effectiveness. In this regard, the F&BKP was a useful feature, as projects used it to share their results and some projects used the opportunity to expand their networks and explore further cooperation, such as starting similar projects in other countries. Moreover, by funding multi-stakeholder consortia and encouraging co-creation, the ARF instrument ensures access to the target groups and other external stakeholders. Regarding co-creation, the evaluation finds that consortium members particularly engage in information seeking and advocating for their joint projects. Moreover, the case studies showed that co-creation involved using networks of consortium members to access political actors and therefore influence policy change. In addition to co-creation, research uptake strategies are important for achieving the project outcomes. In this vein, the evaluation finds that it is important to communicate the results appropriately to the target group to ensure their willingness to be informed by the research results.

In terms of the impact, the interim progress evaluation concluded that the step from outcome to impact was too far, as the transfer of a technology adopted by the ultimate target group to the application on a national level in a country was a bar set too high. In the revised impact pathway, the ARF seeks to contribute to changing food security at local and / or regional levels in ARF countries. Accordingly, the final evaluation identifies successful examples of projects contributing to changing food security at local or regional levels.

In addition, the evaluation finds that the ARF programme uses successful measures for ensuring its sustainability, particularly regarding the technological and institutional sustainability. In this sense, human resources, processes and procedures of the project have been incorporated into the structures of the consortium members (institutional sustainability), and newly developed methods and technologies can be used by the target groups without external assistance and maintenance support after the project (technological sustainability). For achieving institutional sustainability, the close collaboration between project stakeholders in their consortia, their connections to the research topic and a focus on qualifying personnel are identified as important contributing factors. Therefore, the Capacity Building approach that is pursued in the ARF programme is a success factor for ensuring institutional sustainability. Moreover, for ensuring the technological sustainability of the projects, the ARF projects integrated their research into existing value chains and managed to integrate efforts for technological and institutional sustainability. Furthermore, projects that develop technologies which can be turned into business ideas were particularly prone to secure the continued investment of the private partner.

Next to these strengths, the evaluation team also finds some challenges in the ARF programme, which can serve as starting point for the further development and improvement of the programme. In terms of reaching and sustaining the research outcomes, the evaluation finds that local authorities mostly lack the capacities to adopt and eventually sustain the project activities and to follow-up on learned topics to further implement and spread knowledge, e.g. to other parts of the intervention region.

Additionally, regarding co-creation, the evaluation finds that it can be challenging to bridge the interests of consortium members for whom research is more important, and those for whom action and application is more relevant. Thus, even though the collaboration between various partners can lead to synergies, the assumption that the interests and world views of partners will align through collaboration cannot always be confirmed.
Furthermore, the evaluation finds that many ARF projects implemented fewer activities for research uptake than they initially planned. According to the online survey, challenges were that stakeholders did not feel like they had enough time to organise the research uptake and that they encountered unanticipated challenges in the research uptake process.

Moreover, the evaluation finds that some projects struggle with contributing to food security at an impact level. On this issue, the evaluation identifies challenges to achieving impacts across the programme. First, the evaluation finds that some of the basic assumptions of the Food Security Policy that underly the ARF’s revised impact pathway could not be validated. Specifically, the evaluation finds that while the projects contribute to an increase in income of the ultimate target group, this does not necessarily lead to an increase in spending on food or savings and therefore higher food security. In this regard, the case studies showed that the farmers did not see themselves as being food insecure and thus spend the additional money on transportation or education for their children. Moreover, the evaluation finds that a “trade-off” exists between the two ARF programme objectives of fostering private sector development and supporting food insecure target groups. ARF projects that aim to establish a business model do not consistently focus their efforts on vulnerable target groups that suffer under food insecure in the partner countries, but on those who can contribute to the business effort (which mostly are farmers with sufficient income and education). These are for example farmers that can deliver a certain food or seed quality to be further processed, and which are normally not part of the most vulnerable groups.

Regarding the financial sustainability, the ability to acquire additional funding during the project and to carry on project activities after the project has ended has shown to be a challenge across many of the ARF projects. This challenge was already identified in the mid-term evaluation and it has persisted after the projects have ended. In this regard, the final evaluation finds that many projects did not implement measures to ensure that financial resources were available after the projects ended. In addition to the financial sustainability, the evaluation finds that social and ecological sustainability are not taken into consideration in some ARF projects and therefore are sometimes disregarded in the project design. As a result, the case studies have shown some unintended negative effects due to consortium members not showing sufficient awareness of the potential social or ecological harms that may be caused by their projects.

**Strategic-Level Recommendations**

1. Key programme design features, like co-creation, using research uptake strategies, encouraging the regular interaction with stakeholders and the involvement of private sector stakeholders should be considered for further implementation of programmes by NWO-WOTRO and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

2. The Dutch Foreign Ministry and NWO-WOTRO should revise the assumptions underlying the impact pathway, especially concerning the connection between income and food security, ensuring that they reflect the realities of the contexts in which projects operate.

3. The Dutch Foreign Ministry and NWO-WOTRO should make a clear decision about the focus of the ARF instrument or acknowledge the existence of a trade-off effect between the objective of involving vulnerable groups and enhance private sector development. In this regard, the programme can either (a) focus more clearly on vulnerable groups suffering from food insecurity (b) focus more clearly on the development of inclusive private businesses and value chains or (c) accept that there is often a trade-off between the two objectives.

**Operational-Level Recommendations**

1. NWO-WOTRO should make the reduction of harm to ensure social and ecological sustainability a more explicit focus in the project planning stage.

2. To ensure the financial sustainability of the projects, NWO-WOTRO should increase its scrutiny of sustainability strategies and their implementation during the projects’ lifespan.
3. The time frame of projects and the time in which outputs and outcomes can be achieved and observed should be aligned, so that the ARF impact pathway can be accomplished to the output level and initiated to the outcome level within the allocated project time frames.

4. NWO-WOTRO should consider using a standardised online monitoring tool that supports and structures the collection of information from projects to ensure the compliance with quality standards for reporting.