Mid-term evaluation of AGRA’s 2017–2021 strategy implementation

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Executive summary

Context

A mid-term evaluation (MTE) of the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) (https://agra.org/) 2017–2021 strategy and business plan was conducted to assess progress towards key results and targets. The evaluation was commissioned by the Partnership for an Inclusive Agriculture Transformation in Africa (PIATA), which includes the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), the Rockefeller Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

AGRA’s overall goal in its 2017–2021 strategy is to ‘catalyse and sustain an Inclusive Agricultural Transformation in sub-Saharan Africa that is underpinned by increased incomes and improved food security of at least nine million smallholder farming households directly, and a further 21 million smallholder farmers indirectly’.¹,² To deliver on this strategy, AGRA is working on three strategy intervention areas: 1) Policy and State Capability (P&SC), 2) Systems Development and 3) Partnerships. The 2017–2021 period had a projected budget of $500 million, of which $280 million has been committed – with half of this amount spent.

Countries in which AGRA is operating are Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda. AGRA also aims to address several cross-cutting issues, including resilience, women’s empowerment, youth empowerment and capacity development. AGRA’s 2017–2021 strategy had a projected budget of $500 million, of which $280 million was committed at the start by BMGF, the Rockefeller Foundation and USAID. Over half has now been spent in supporting implementation across the 11 countries. The development of this strategy, along with a change management process, was informed by an independent institutional evaluation of AGRA published in 2016.³

Purpose, objectives, approach and intended utility

The purpose of this MTE was to ‘assess what is, and is not, working well in implementation, evaluate progress towards objectives and outcomes, call attention to any unintended outcomes, and provide evidence-based findings and recommendations that AGRA—and its partners—can use to proactively improve activity effectiveness and better achieve its goals and objectives’. The MTE Terms of Reference (TOR)⁴ further goes on to note that the MTE should look not only at programmatic results, but also at the approaches and practices underlying these. In consultation with AGRA, the evaluation team (ET) defined three evaluation objectives, which were to assess:

Objective 1: AGRA’s progress in delivering its 2017–2021 strategy;

Objective 2: How well organisational reforms AGRA initiated in support of its 2017–2021 strategy are progressing; and

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¹ AGRA Strategy and Business Plan Overview 2017–2021, updated 2019, page 17
² AGRA defines agricultural transformation as ‘a process by which farmers shift from highly diversified, subsistence-oriented production towards more specialised production oriented towards the market or other systems of exchange, involving a greater reliance on input and output delivery systems and increased integration of agriculture with other sectors of the domestic and international economies’ (Country Operational Plans (COPs)).
³ AGRA Institutional Evaluation, DAI, 15 February 2016. See Annex 2 for a summary of the key findings.
⁴ See Annex 3.
**Objective 3**: The extent to which PIATA is leading partners to work differently in support of the shared RF.

The MTE had a duration of six months and started in late July. It had three phases: inception, data collection, and data synthesis and analysis. The formative process evaluation used a utilisation approach throughout. This involved engaging with AGRA staff and the resource partners (RPs) from the start to find out their concerns, hopes and expectations of the MTE and what they would find most useful in informing the remainder of the strategic period. It further involved on-going consultation, for example through gaining feedback on the inception report and emerging findings and co-creating recommendations with AGRA and the RPs. This approach was designed to enhance the likelihood of uptake of recommendations.

**Methodology**

Data was gathered from documents mainly sourced from AGRA that were reviewed and triangulated with primary data gathered through 167 structured interviews, direct observation and an online survey of a sample of AGRA’s implementing partners. Interviews were conducted in an ethical manner, governed by Itad ethical principles (Annex 9 in the main report). Each interviewee was advised about the background and purpose of the interview (Annex 10 in the main report). The use of information was anonymised and based on informed consent. Interviewees were identified through purposive sampling, targeting key informants and AGRA staff who were experts in the subject matters under investigation. There were numerous findings across evaluation questions (EQs) so the ET employed a robust system to sift and only report findings meeting the ET’s strength of evidence criteria. Hence, the report reflects only well-triangulated and consistent findings and not isolated unsubstantiated opinions. Similarly, only judgements based on a strong evidence base were used to inform conclusions and recommendations. Findings were validated through country-level debriefs for the four countries visited (Ghana, Malawi, Mali and Tanzania) and an emerging findings workshop, conducted during the data synthesis and analysis phase with key AGRA head office, regional and country staff. This gave AGRA and the RPs the opportunity to present evidence to challenge, nuance and validate emerging findings. While the ET encountered several limitations to its effective completion of the MTE, including inconsistent and inadequate qualitative data and the short evaluation timeframe, these were mitigated or addressed as far as was possible through running evaluation processes in parallel, sense-checking and reviewing additional evidence, and conducting follow-up interviews. The ET remains confident in the strength and robustness of the findings and basis on which conclusions and recommendations were drawn.

**Main findings Objective 1: AGRA’s progress in delivering its 2017–2021 strategy**

**Policy and Advocacy**

AGRA has made considerable progress in the area of Policy and Advocacy, particularly given its short duration and the political economic challenges in the geographies in which it is operating. As a unique African body, AGRA is perceived to have more legitimacy to reach governments than other development partners, creating opportunities for effective advocacy. It has firmly established its Unique Service Offering as broker, catalyst and convenor. AGRA’s work in Policy and Advocacy is prone to external threats relating to corruption and mismanagement of resources by governments as well as internal threats linked to the AGRA grant management process, which may potentially affect observed results.

**State Capability**

AGRA is responsive to government needs and windows of opportunity. It balances being responsive to government with maintaining a strategic direction insofar as its budget allows. AGRA is supporting...
national agriculture investment plans in all 11 countries and flagships\(^7\) in 7 countries, though progress has generally been slow and design inadequate in some places. Inadequacies in design, risk management and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) of AGRA’s work on State Capability compromise its ability to deliver effectively. These, coupled with external threats relating to corruption and mismanagement of resources, potentially compromise the effectiveness and sustainability of its initiatives.

**Systems Development**

AGRA’s progress against the 2017–2021 strategy in the SD space has generally been slower than anticipated. The review of two consortia identified issues with the design of AGRA’s SD interventions, including a lack of conceptual clarity; incomplete systems diagnostics at sub-national/consortia level; and inadequate sustainability, scale and inclusion strategies. Most of the farmer-level results achieved to date appear to be unsustainable as they result from either the direct delivery of products and services to farmers or models with questionable incentive structures.

**Partnerships**

There is a lack of clarity regarding the Partnerships theme, both within AGRA (particularly at the country level) and among some stakeholders and RPs. Memoranda of understanding (MOUs) and letters of intent have been signed between AGRA and private sector partners through the Deal Room at the recent African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF), realising investment of over $50 million. These cannot yet be termed ‘strategic’ private sector partnerships as they are still in their early stages.

**Main findings**

**Objective 2:** How well organisational reforms AGRA initiated in support of its 2017–2021 strategy are progressing

**How AGRA can optimise its delivery model to accelerate impact**

Changes to the type of support associated with AGRA’s delivery model are reflected in the Country Operational Plans (COPs), but shortfalls in the COPs create challenges to achieving inclusive agricultural transformation. Divisions at headquarters are working together in establishing links between them in support of the integrated delivery model, with variable success. The tools and approaches developed by AGRA are mostly adequate but vary in their coverage at strategic level and quality at country level. AGRA has successfully secured $262.5 million for flagships in Ghana ($260 million) and Tanzania ($2.5 million). It has also mobilised funds through grants.

**AGRA’s effectiveness in monitoring progress and inclusivity of work and in taking corrective measures if required**

AGRA has an efficient management information system (AMIS) but the data it generates is not in a form that can usefully inform decision-making. While there are some opportunities for learning at grantee and country level, AGRA’s monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) approach gives minimal scope for learning and knowledge-sharing at headquarters, Board and PIATA Advisory Committee (PAC) levels. The MEL process is constrained by there being too much and too frequent reporting at all levels and a lack of clarity on what information is needed to inform decision-making. Mechanisms exist for identifying and addressing gaps or threats to inclusive progress, but these are constrained by lack of evidence, particularly in relation to evidence and insights on inclusivity.

\(^7\) Read more on flagships [here](#)
How well the decentralisation process is progressing and its impact on delivery

AGRA’s performance on the decentralisation process at headquarters and country levels is mixed. Headquarters divisions are in the early stages of reconfiguring their objectives, services, guidance products and performance standards in support of regional and country teams. Financial arrangements sometimes contradict the spirit of decentralisation, with implications for relationships between countries and headquarters and compromising in-country performance. The current grant management process is not aligned with a decentralised AGRA and, combined with the types and scale of grants being provided, is creating negative impacts on delivery, and potentially on AGRA’s reputation, despite good support of grantees by AGRA staff at all levels. Having country teams has provided AGRA with greater visibility at country level, and regional teams are supporting and complementing their capacity in their areas of expertise. However, more needs to be done to ensure effective delivery.

The extent to which AGRA been able to develop the capabilities and culture required to enable the delivery model

AGRA has committed, professional and experienced staff, something that contributes to its reputation. However, this experience does not always stretch to the new functions that staff have in the three thematic areas and countries. Many AGRA country teams are understaffed and overworked – a fair proportion of staff reported that they did not feel valued or supported adequately by the organisation.

Objective 3: The extent to which PIATA is leading partners to work differently in support of the shared results framework

The PIATA MOU and Charter indicate that PAC should have both advisory and accountability functions. This is confusing in that accountability of AGRA is to its Board. However, interviews with both PAC members and AGRA staff indicated that they were clear about the fit of PIATA with AGRA governance. RPs have a shared vision for AGRA. The PAC working groups have had an impact on AGRA’s strategic thinking, though this is limited by the minimal sharing of challenges or lessons learnt by AGRA with PAC. Despite good collaboration in elaboration of the shared results framework (RF), it still has some shortfalls, and donor-specific reporting remains necessary alongside the harmonised reporting systems to the Board and to PIATA given the need for accountability. Involvement in PAC has led to some degree of RP collaboration beyond AGRA.

The relevance of the country advisory committees (CACs), other than for accountability to AGRA donors at the country level, is questionable. Nevertheless, country managers are agile in identifying the best use of a CAC in their countries alongside existing fora. While the PIATA Charter indicates that RPs will collaborate to mobilise additional resources to be used in furtherance of the shared vision and RF, the envisaged amount of resources has not yet been secured and there are challenges in securing additional funding at the country level.

Conclusions

Objective 1: AGRA’s progress in delivering the 2017–2021 strategy

Given that AGRA is still carrying out organisational changes whilst also seeking to deliver against targets, and given that the MTE took place just 20 months into the strategy period, it is concluded that progress towards Strategy delivery is fair overall. Policy and advocacy work is progressing well, building on legacy projects. Progress in the state capability thematic area is promising but such work needs time. Work under the partnerships theme (focusing on the connections being made with agribusinesses e.g. through the Deal Room) is nascent and encouraging – it requires strong follow-through and greater understanding within AGRA between divisions regarding the potential of such deals. Systems development work is below target and the new integrated delivery model through consortia needs greater technical guidance.
Objective 2: How well the organisational reforms to support strategy implementation are progressing

The revised delivery model is, in some ways, promoting a more integrated and supportive set of functional relationships among HQ divisions and their support to country teams. However, this does not always play out in practice across all divisions. With regards to MEL, there is limited evidence to suggest that AGRA is a learning organisation as its MEL system is driven by and is largely confined to quantitative indicators and current learning efforts not consistent across the organisation. There are pockets of unsystematised learning; where it is systematised, it is largely consigned to the annual outcome survey. AGRA is making good progress in decentralisation and this has provided the organisation with improved proximity to and greater understanding of countries and partners. Its full benefits for performance are yet to unfold, but there is room for improvement in how decisions are made regarding financing country plans and grants. The nature and scope of work defined across the three themes raise questions about assumptions AGRA has made regarding the necessary skills and capacities required to deliver the strategy. An effect of this lies in how, despite being overworked with limited time to reflect, staff are fearful of and intimidated by a distinctly hierarchical culture.

Objective 3: The extent to which PIATA is leading partners to work differently in support of the shared RF

The shared RF has led to greater alignment in the support PIATA members provide to AGRA. PIATA has led PAC members too start collaborating on a range of issues beyond AGRA. The PACs guidance to AGRA is appreciated but could be improved by the reports to PIATA providing more qualitative analysis of quantitative data, and more reflection on progress and challenges. More work can be done to nurture the CACs to fulfil their purposes as outlined in the PIATA MOU and Charter. In sum, the fact that large donors have signed up to support agricultural transformation in a harmonised manner across eleven countries is a big step forward and could over time be an example for other donors to take a harmonised approach.

Recommendations (co-created)

In line with the utilisation focused approach, the ET created space to jointly create recommendations with AGRA and its RPs. From the findings, the ET identified the five most recurring themes, against which it developed five top-line recommendations for joint elaboration and co-creation with AGRA:

- **Strategy: Policy and State Capability**,  
- **Strategy: Systems Development and Partnerships**,  
- **Decentralisation**,  
- **Monitoring Evaluation and Learning**,  
- **Grants**

**Strategy:** At the strategy level (Recommendations 1 and 2 below), AGRA should review its objectives against its vision and goals and time and resources for 2017–2021 and look at what to realistically focus on.

1. **Policy and State Capability:** AGRA should consider streamlining efforts to focus on implementation of policies, addressing macro reforms and tackling system bottlenecks in priority areas, drawing on its Unique Service Offering, complementary work, partnerships and alliances. (Informed by two conclusions and ten findings across two objectives.)

2. **Systems Development and Partnerships:** AGRA should build staff capacity in systems development; measure, document and share lessons learnt about, and successes in, systems development and use this as a potential evidence for scaling; and focus on linkages with private sector off-takers and
processors within its integrated delivery. (Informed by two conclusions and nine findings across two objectives.)

3. **Decentralisation**: With decentralisation as a key deliverable for 2020, AGRA should increase the level of empowerment and accountability of country teams in terms of the country planning-budgeting-review cycle, developing regional strategies and improving the design of COPs, with appropriate levels of quality assurance. (Informed by two conclusions and seven findings from one objective.)

4. **Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning**: AGRA should review its MEL system to improve the measurement of strategic outcomes, better distinguish information/reporting requirements on a quarterly and annual basis and foster learning through the generation of qualitative data to complement existing qualitative data and support decision-making. (Informed by two conclusions and seven findings across two objectives.)

5. **Grants**: For non-competitive grants, AGRA should improve the quality of grant design and efficiency of grant management. (Informed by three conclusions and eight findings across all three objectives.)

**Independent recommendations by the Evaluation Team**

In addition to the co-created recommendations, the ET made five independent recommendations.

6. **AGRA would benefit from reconsidering and strengthening its intervention logic**

AGRA should strengthen its intervention logic and the assumptions underlying this across all the thematic areas. A clear and strong intervention logic and related assumptions would help AGRA better define what success looks like in the short, medium and long term. This includes providing greater clarity around concepts such as ‘sustainability’, ‘inclusion’ and ‘transformational change’, and assessing the extent to which these concepts are adequately captured in their intervention logic. Once clarity is attained regarding the intervention logic, AGRA can better identify and apply milestones periodically to see if they are on track, assess if associated assumptions hold and identify what is working well and what is not working well. (Informed by multiple findings across two objectives.)

7. **AGRA and its RPs should revisit their mutual accountability in relation to learning and cultivate a positive culture for this**

AGRA and PIATA (the RPs) should together consider what mutual accountability means for them and ways in which space can be opened for AGRA and RPs to make mistakes, fail and learn and be open about this in terms of strategy implementation. This may involve a change in culture within AGRA, to be more critical of itself and less task-oriented and to better understand how success and innovation often stem from failure. A practical step towards this would be to ensure a balanced set of Key Performance Indicators for appraising staff performance that affords as much importance to learning as it does to compliance with rules and processes and achieving targets. A more fundamental step towards this would be for AGRA’s leadership and culture to be one in which staff are supported and motivated and feel able to share the challenges they face in implementing their programmes. Addressing Recommendation 10 below will help clarify where the accountability of AGRA, its Board and the RPs begins and ends, keeping in mind the clear governance role of the Board and the advisory role of PIATA (the RPs). (Informed by two conclusions and ten findings across two objectives.)

8. **AGRA should take a strategic and tailored approach in terms of country and regional-level interventions during the remaining strategy period**

One of the Eqs was, ‘Are there any practices/interventions that should be accelerated/scaled up or stopped or new practices/interventions introduced to enable the achievement of the strategy for inclusive agricultural transformation?’ The ET suggests that these are best identified at country and regional levels. A review of where each country programme is now, what its strengths are, what its Unique Service Offering or niche is in that country and what is going well could inform planning for the remainder of the strategy period. The ET does not recommend major shifts in direction at this stage. This means that
decisions on whether to reduce some aspects of COPs and scale up other aspects is something that should be taken at the country level (with guidance from the regional teams and HQs).

AGRA should prioritise consolidating work in the 11 countries and only consider expanding to further countries during this strategy period where there is strategic opportunity to operate in the regional economic community space. (Informed by multiple findings across two objectives.)

9. **AGRA should revisit its integrated (systems development) delivery model**

During the remainder of this strategy period AGRA should, with the help of PIATA partners, revisit its integrated systems development delivery model. Changes may be needed in direction and approach, or indeed at a more fundamental level. Questions that need to be considered by AGRA, with the help of PIATA, include the following: If the integrated delivery model for systems development is aimed at proof of concept and piloting, then is AGRA best placed to do this? What have other PIATA partners already done in this space? Has learning from this been shared with AGRA? If AGRA has a role in testing proof of concept, is it going about this in the best way? It is possible that reflection by AGRA on its positioning in this space would help, as there are mixed understandings in AGRA about working with agribusinesses. (Informed by four conclusions and ten findings across two objectives.)

10. **The PAC should reflect on and update the PIATA MOU and Charter, the nature of reporting required and how best to nurture the CACs**

It is recommended that the MOU and Charter be updated to include both DFID (a voting member) and BMZ/KfW (currently a non-voting member). This would provide the opportunity to revisit the references to each of AGRA and PIATA in both the MOU and Charter, which are currently unclear in places, including in relation to the governance functions of each. To enable PAC to provide informed advice to AGRA, the contents of the six-monthly reports from AGRA to PIATA should provide greater qualitative analysis and reflection on quantitative content.

On revisiting the MOU and Charter, PAC could reassess the intended purpose and roles of the CACs. Most of the CACs are at their early stages and could be encouraged to work more on alignment and coordination where appropriate (particularly in contexts where there are existing agriculture sector working groups and donor groups). One clear opportunity of the CACs is to allow co-learning. Countries should be encouraged to continue tailoring how they use the CACs within the particular context and the focus of support to the agriculture sector in each country. (Informed by two conclusions and six findings across one objective.)