

Mid-Term Evaluation of AGRA's 2017-2021 Strategy

Explanatory Note

AGRA agreed with its PIATA (Partnership for an Inclusive Agricultural Transformation in Africa) partners to undertake a mid-term evaluation to assess what is, and is not, working well with the implementation of the 2017-2021 strategic plan, and call attention to progress made towards outcomes, gaps, and unintended consequences of these changes. The review was intended to serve primarily as a management and strategic tool and provide recommendations that AGRA—and its partners—can use to proactively improve effectiveness and better achieve its goals and objectives.

The Mid-term Evaluation was conducted independently by ITAD, overseen by PIATA partners. It had a duration of a year, beginning in September 2019. AGRA received the report in February, for review by its board in April, and discussions with its PIATA partners. Based on these discussions, AGRA identified several actions to be implemented to improve in areas where there were gaps. AGRA is now, in line with its commitment to transparency and to help other partners learn from AGRA's challenges and successes, releasing this Mid-term evaluation.

AGRA would like to thank ITAD, PIATA partners, its Board, its national and local partners in supporting this evaluation, and remains committed to the strengthening of the programme and delivery of its strategy.

Please click [here](#) for the Executive Summary of the Mid-term Evaluation and [here](#) for the entire Report.

Context and Introduction

Informed by rigorous reviews, evaluations, consultations with key governments in the region, and a focus on country-led planning, AGRA kicked off a complex and far reaching organizational restructuring for its 2017-2021 strategy. This new strategy aimed to increase country-level engagement, provide a more integrated and tailored service offering, and respond to the changing agri-food systems on the continent. AGRA thus transformed itself from an organization with a series of successful vertical programmes (seeds, soil, skills, finance) to one geared towards catalyzing an inclusive agricultural transformation with governments and partners across 11 countries.

The catalytic focus was built on the strong belief that African countries can implement an agricultural transformation if systemic hurdles were overcome, and a recognition of the need for a multi-stakeholder partnership that includes the farmers, governments, the development community and the private sector. The focus reflected the fact that AGRA's resources are less than 2% of the development resources required to transform agriculture and end hunger in Africa. We were aspirational in our goals, looking for common national, continental and global targets. We recognized that mobilizing partners to reach 30 million farmers in five years would be aspirational but nevertheless an important challenge to set for the whole community. Africa needs ambitious goals to end hunger, but to accomplish them and move forward on zero hunger in the next 10 years requires the resources and contributions of many other stakeholders.

To support this new strategic direction, over the past three years AGRA underwent a redesign process, taking lessons from its first 10 years of existence, especially having learned from its investments and mistakes. AGRA used this to update its institutional strategy, launched new bodies of work with government and partners and adjusted its delivery model to match its goal of catalyzing an agricultural transformation. Beginning in 2017, AGRA established decentralized offices in 11 countries, hired new staff to support countries, and began a new grant making model that focused on

capacity support to unlock persistent systemic challenges in governments and for the local private sector, mostly SMEs.

With governments, our overarching goal was to support strategy and planning especially in the design of fundable and implementable flagship investment programs, enhanced coordination and better M&E and accountability frameworks - all aimed at improving delivery and implementation of public programs in the sector. AGRA positioned its teams to support the policy reform processes and associated regulatory environment that governments could use to nurture private sector growth.

At the same time, AGRA set out to elevate and amplify the continental advocacy and coordination agenda, through the Seize the Moment Campaign. AGRA positioned the African Green Revolution Forum (AGRF) to raise the profile of the agriculture sector as well as Africa's voice around what is at stake for multiple stakeholders.

Most important to note is that AGRA's choices in this new strategy were informed by the needs and feedback as expressed by governments and government partners, AGRA's funding partners and implementing partners, private sector and farmers themselves. AGRA's support to countries was therefore guided by national priorities under the CAADP/Malabo framework of driving agricultural transformation across the continent and targeting countries' efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

With the same intent of being supportive of efforts at the national level, the Partnership for an Inclusive Agriculture Transformation in Africa (PIATA)¹ platform, comprised of five leading development partners, was launched to enhance coordination, alignment and reduce fragmented support to countries.

The 2017-2021 Strategy Journey

AGRA learned a lot over its first 10 years of existence. One of our biggest lessons is that challenges facing small holder farmers cannot be solved only at the farm level. They need to be solved at the ecosystem level where investments and private sector capacities are low, and systems that should deliver input and output markets are weak. Furthermore, governments are challenged to provide adequate support to maintain extension services, and institutional and policy reforms and investments are not commensurate with sector needs. This agriculture transformation challenge is arguably at the root of Africa's battle to eradicate hunger and poverty.

AGRA responded by shifting from a focus on making technologies (seeds, fertilizers etc.) available, to supporting functional input and output systems and enhancing government capacity to deliver for the private sector and for smallholder farmers. AGRA is convinced that this approach will both allow faster scaling, and be more inclusive and sustainable.

AGRA has thus remodeled itself into a uniquely African institution whose greatest strength comes from: 1) understanding the challenges that underpin the limitations that make it difficult for governments to deliver, 2) good technical grounding of agricultural issues that allows for the ability to support both government and private sector needs, 3) a humble yet strong commitment to a 'we/you can do it attitude,' in a non-judgmental and non-threatening approach that creates trust, and allows things to move forward faster.

As a result, AGRA has built trust amongst African governments as an African, neutral organization that can help them catalyze change and progress and mobilize investment more immediately with a clear aspiration to contribute their longer-term objective for the sector. It is because of this trust that AGRA is increasingly effective in supporting policy reforms, supportive in designing investment pipelines (flagships), and impartial to address some of the more difficult challenges around improving mutual accountability with partners.

¹ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, USAID, UK Government (now FCDO), German Government (BMZ) and Rockefeller Foundation.



This approach allowed for high aspirations to be set for AGRA's partnerships on the continent. AGRA recognized its success would come from how well government capacity improved through its support and how fast governments and partners became motivated to improve farmers' lives through increasing investments in the sector, strengthening the role of the private sector and the capacities of public institutions. In tying its goals to CAADP/Malabo, AGRA therefore associated itself with the target of doubling productivity and incomes. AGRA believed that to support African countries in getting to zero hunger by 2030, it would also have to be ambitious with farmer numbers. AGRA therefore targets to reach 30 million farmers directly and indirectly through support to governments, SMEs and better functioning systems.

AGRA believes that through combined efforts with the governments and some of its partners, it will achieve this farmer reach target by the end of 2021. This includes ensuring that farmers have knowledge and information on how to improve yields, better access to improved inputs, availability of agronomic information, and the capacity to compete on the market with better quality products. AGRA's expectation is that at the minimum and other factors being equal, this should allow farmers with very low productivity to double yields, which in real terms may mean producing one ton instead of half a ton per hectare farmed. While these types of increases are much easier to achieve than getting a farmer producing two tons to double to four tons; they are still subject to many factors that are beyond AGRA's control.

AS AGRA pursues this strategy, AGRA is aware of the fact that production increases (whether through AGRA investments or others) come with new challenges, which AGRA and its partners will have to learn from and react to. For example:

- a. Increases in production need support to markets to effectively take on commodities. AGRA has therefore invested in a consortia platform approach to facilitate market linkages but is also investing in understanding and unlocking regional food trade.
- b. As climate change sets in, AGRA is building resilience approaches into its work in addition to being on the lookout for new ideas and opportunities it can share with partners. In this regard, AGRA's work is differentiated by an agroecological approach to sub-Saharan Africa in order to support crop diversification (necessary for broader environmental, development, nutritional and household outcomes).
- c. Important externalities retard productivity and income growth, including but not limited to climate, fall army worm, and locusts; but also the impact of non-farm labor markets, infrastructure etc, which AGRA can only hope to influence by supporting governments and partners as they make their investments.

Even as AGRA's strategy focuses on driving results towards inclusive change and impact, tracking this has proved to be difficult, as the evaluation team noted. AGRA has therefore prioritized strengthening its results tracking, picking up data through its village based advisers, looking more closely at productivity and income growth in limited geographies, and continuing to invest in outcome panel surveys and independent evaluations. AGRA is committed to making this analysis publicly available.

AGRA has undergone deep changes since its last strategy, with many of the challenges involved in doing so brought to the attention of the evaluators by both staff and partners. Even though studies show that 70% of change processes fail,² and that it requires time for a major institutional shift and strategic pivot, AGRA has made considerable progress in its first 20 months including establishing teams in each country and building trust with governments and a good number of partners. AGRA needed time to develop the right kind of systems and matrix management approaches to support an integrated country approach while supporting a wider regional and continental agenda. Based on the findings of this MTE, we have already made several significant adjustments to our tools and systems in the course of this strategy.

² <https://www.forbes.com/sites/brentgleeson/2017/07/25/1-reason-why-most-change-management-efforts-fail/#2268bd7e546b>

Mid-Term Evaluation: Methodology and Terms of Reference³

The MTE was designed to evaluate AGRA and the PIATA partnership some 20 months into the signing of that partnership in 2017. Its primary objectives were to assess:

1. AGRA's progress in delivering its 2017–2021 strategy;
2. Progress against organizational reforms initiated in support of AGRA'S 2017–2021 strategy; and
3. The extent to which PIATA is leading partners to work differently in support of a shared Results Framework.

AGRA'S 2017-2021 Strategic Plan (<https://agra.org/our-strategy/>) focuses on three headline goals: to directly reach 9 million farmers, indirectly reach another 21 million, and support 11 countries on their path to agriculture transformation. This was articulated through the following objectives as defined in its Results Framework, with a series of indicators to show progress against each one. These are objectives with high ambition and aspirations and must be weighed against the context above; in addition, they are prone to being affected by external factors.

- Objective 1: Increased staple crop productivity for smallholder farmers;
- Objective 2: Strengthened and expanded access to national and regional output markets;
- Objective 3: Increased capacity of smallholder farming households and agricultural systems to better prepare for and adapt to shocks and stresses;
- Objective 4: Strengthened continental, regional, and government multi-sectoral coordination and mutual accountability in the agriculture sector.

AGRA in its 2017-2021 Strategy delivers against the above objectives through three bodies of work:

- State Capability & Policy Engagement: Working with government to strengthen execution capacity while enhancing the transparency, accountability systems, and policy environment for increased public and SME investment in agriculture;
- Systems Development: Building downstream delivery systems closer to smallholder farmers while providing support to the local private sector to scale technologies and services which deliver better productivity and incomes;
- Partnerships: Facilitating the alignment between government priorities and SME needs — improving integration and coordination to catalyze investments beneficial to smallholder farmers.

The evaluation was expected to examine themes of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability / scale as it relates to these areas.

Evaluation Questions

The ITAD team used the following questions to conduct the evaluation:

EQ1. What progress has AGRA made against its five-year strategy to achieve inclusive agricultural transformation?

EQ2. How can AGRA optimise its delivery model to accelerate impact?

EQ3. How effectively does AGRA monitor progress and inclusivity of its work and take corrective measures if required?

³ MTE p54-5

EQ4. What has been the effect of the new partnership engagement and funding model – working through a shared RF versus individual donor initiatives?

EQ5. To what extent are PIATA's positive impacts likely to continue after the end of the project?

EQ6. How effective has AGRA been in establishing a Unique Service Offering in partnerships with governments?

EQ7. How effective has AGRA been in forming strategic partnerships at the continental, regional and country level?

EQ8. How well is the decentralisation process progressing and what has been its impact on delivery?

EQ9. To what extent has AGRA created a shared identity and culture in support of the new culture? Where has progress been made?

AGRA's observations on Methodology and Approach

AGRA expressed its appreciation for the work and independence of the ITAD team. AGRA welcomed and accepted the Mid-term Evaluation final report, and is well on track to implementing the actions to address recommendations, despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 in the management of our programme this year.

AGRA and its PIATA partners noted the challenges of evaluating AGRA so early in such a major transition. The shifts AGRA was making were significant, around re-staffing, orientating grants, moving from an implementer to a catalyst, and to identifying gaps at a country level across the continent. A late stage evaluation would normally require a triangulation of documented strategy approaches, qualitative input through interviews and observation, and M&E data. AGRA and its partners knew the third leg would be a challenge at this early stage, later confirmed by ITAD as they attempted to marshal evidence. AGRA also raised its concern with PIATA partners and the ITAD team about the withdrawal of the agricultural systems expert from the team, and took note that only one consortium could be visited, thus placing considerable challenge on the assessment of AGRA's work in systems, then constituting the overwhelming majority of AGRA's work at country level.

Despite these constraints, it was still agreed to move forward to take an early view on AGRA's progress in this transition to a new strategy. The evaluation was initially designed as an internal exercise and report (to the partnership and organization) to consider how to steer the following two years. This was done particularly to identify gaps so course corrections could be made. The importance of continual evaluation and external feedback is important to AGRA to help learn where it can do better. Consequently, we see value in sharing publicly as many of the challenges apply to development and transformation of the ag sector in general.

Main Findings

In **Objective 1**, examining AGRA's progress in delivering its 2017-21 strategy, evaluators found that:

- AGRA had made fair progress overall in delivering against its strategy. AGRA took note of the evaluators' view that considerable progress had been made in the areas of supporting policy and advocacy, supporting government capacity needs, and nationally led development had been made, although strengthening was needed in the area of State Capability.
- In AGRA's work in systems, evaluators pointed to slower progress than expected, with a need for strengthening conceptual approaches, diagnostics, sustainability and inclusion strategies in AGRA's work through its consortia. AGRA undertook to develop further its thinking on intervention logic as a result.
- On partnerships, evaluators suggested that while progress had been made, it was too early to tell if they were strategic in nature.

Overall, AGRA was pleased to note the findings that a) AGRA has achieved great legitimacy to reach government as a unique African body, and b) AGRA has firmly established its unique service offering only 20 months into its strategy.

Under evaluation **Objective 2**, evaluators found and recommended:

- Measures to sharpen the delivery model, and while commending the Management Information System in place, suggested that improvements are needed in how data is collected and analyzed.
- On decentralization, evaluators found progress in many areas, but recommended improvements that AGRA largely accepted.
- Lastly, on capabilities and culture required to deliver the strategy, the evaluation found that AGRA has 'committed, professional and capable staff', but that their experience does not always cover the needs of the three bodies of work. Staff consequently have reported feeling understaffed and overworked.

In **Objective 3**, evaluators recommended that:

- the focus on the PIATA partnership should be clarified around issues of accountability, particularly with respect to the role of AGRA's board.
- The Evaluators saw great potential for the PIATA partnership model, but suggested more time was needed to assess the success of the model.

AGRA's Implementation of the MTE Recommendations and issues arising:

PIATA partners were impressed with the progress AGRA has made in its strategic evolution as an organization in moving forward a new strategy and adjusting its engagement model accordingly. Partners observed that many of the challenges assessed by the MTE ITAD team are intrinsic and common across the sector and not exclusive to AGRA. As expected at the start of the MTE, gaps were identified which were to be addressed in collaboration with AGRA's partners. Consequently, AGRA has analyzed the findings and recommendations of the MTE and based on guidance from its PIATA partners and the Board, identified 29 actions to be taken to strengthen the institution and delivery of its strategy. To date, 19 have been implemented, 9 are on track, and one has yet to be started. Delays in addressing some recommendations are largely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on AGRA's operation. Nonetheless, we expect all recommendations to be completed on a timely basis, and to play a material role in strengthening AGRA's programs.

AGRA has focused on eight headline actions:

1. An update of AGRA's **monitoring** framework to capture the recommendations of the evaluation.
2. Further strengthening AGRA's model of **decentralization**, with focus on delegation of authority, devolution of roles, and efficiency of business processes.
3. Take a more considered approach to **knowledge, learnings and thought partnership**, recognizing that AGRA needs to learn from others even as it contributes its own lessons.
4. A further evolution of AGRA's approach to **flagships**, to learn from the experience to date, to set more clearly parameters and implementation pathways, and understand better how success and lessons can be measured/captured.
5. An evolution of AGRA's **policy** support model, with country level prioritization and mapping at macro, mid and micro levels, a greater focus on implementation and linkages through to systems level, SMEs, and farmers.
6. Strengthening of **approach towards systems**, including development of a clear intervention logic, strengthening the capacity of staff, systems diagnostics, capacities for learning, and private sector linkages.

7. Significant development of AGRA's **partnership model**, including linkages to SMEs, private sector partnerships systematically to country teams and consortia and a clearer package of results targets to go with it;
8. An articulation and development of country partner mapping and country partnership strategies.

Tracking and Analyzing Results

AGRA took note of the findings and recommendations on monitoring, data and results. One year into its strategy, AGRA and its partners adjusted the approach to this strategy to take on a much more explicit approach to work in agricultural systems, to address the deep rooted problems across the agricultural sector. This necessary shift by definition takes considerably more time to show results and is also harder to measure and attribute institutional actions. Nevertheless, as a result of the MTE and AGRA's own analysis, AGRA has further developed its results framework to better analyze measures of change and will continue to evolve this approach. AGRA is also developing change / impact questions through which higher level results can be articulated through the organization of its current data tracking and align new data collection efforts. This will help us capture both qualitative and quantitative data and attempt to assess attribution levels related to AGRA's work over time. AGRA is therefore committed to working more systematically with learning focused organizations, to drive change over time.

Conclusion

While AGRA was founded around the concern that African farmers needed to have access to improved seeds and fertilizers that could help them increase yields, like other farmers around the world through what was then called a unique African green revolution, AGRA has since evolved through its 2017-2021 strategy. As described above, AGRA's work now focuses on supporting a functional ecosystem around the farmer, addressing government challenges that stand in the way of delivery, and improving capacities of local SMEs that are critical to taking services to farmers. AGRA's work in the first 10 years and an assessment of the agriculture landscape has shown that AGRA could not just concentrate on ensuring access to inputs; seeds, fertilizers and finance. Inclusive transformation requires an agriculture sector-wide approach, necessitating that AGRA reconsiders its own approach, strategic role and contribution.

The evolution towards unique capabilities that foster the ability to catalyze scale where the lives of 9 million farmers directly, 21 million indirectly, across 11 countries could transform through doubling yields and incomes was as aspirational, difficult, but also as real as it must be. The deep rooted and structural impediments to agricultural transformation that have held back the transformation of the agriculture sector in Africa, the difficulty of this task, especially its inability to sustain gains through functional institutions, are the reasons why AGRA is willing to be daring. Against this, it has to be increasingly systematic about how it learns, which this MTE has been an important tool in helping to achieve. We will continue to evolve and learn as an organization, and share our experiences, successes and failures with partners.

The end of strategy evaluation conducted in 2021/2022 will assess how successful AGRA's model has been when applied to target farmers, and to what extent that led to better outcomes for farmers. It will also have more data to assess whether AGRA's integrated approach to systems and its national and continental level investments is helping catalyze change at national, regional and continental level. The end of strategy evaluation will also be published on AGRA's website.