

AGRODEP Inception Workshop: Executive Summary

October 28-29, 2010

Dakar, Senegal

This is a summary of the full documentation of the AGRODEP Inception Workshop held on October 28-29, 2010 in Dakar, Senegal. To request a copy of the full workshop documentation, please contact info-agrodep@agrodep.org.

Executive Summary

The Inception Workshop of the African Growth and Development Policy (AGRODEP) Modeling Consortium, organized by IFPRI, was held in the Le President Meridien Hotel, Dakar, Senegal, on October 28 and 29, 2010. It gathered 64 researchers interested in policy modeling and in Africa's economic development and was facilitated by Dr. Jürgen Hagmann and Ms. Judith Odhiambo of the Institute for People, Innovation & Change in Organizations (PICOTEAM).

The objective of the Dakar meeting was to bring the members and networks together to revisit what has been done so far, but most importantly to define the main directions of AGRODEP. The meeting focused on building a concrete strategic framework that will ensure that a critical mass of modelers in Africa will have large competences in modeling and can actively participate in the policy debate around issues concerning the development of Africa.

1. Opening and Setting the Scene

The workshop began with opening remarks by Dr. Ousmane Badiane (IFPRI), Dr. Mbène Dièye Faye (CORAF/WECARD), Dr. Lindiwe Majele Sibanda (FANRPAN), and Dr. Michael Waithaka (ASARECA).

The opening remarks were followed by an introduction of the facilitation team, the facilitation approach, and the process steering group (PSG). This was the process of getting to know each other and understanding facilitation roles and values. The table interaction was guided by a set of core values and rules such as informality/relaxed atmosphere with discipline, inclusiveness, openness, transparency and accountability, constructive controversy, no defensiveness, no jargon, pragmatism, accepting reality, creativity, honesty, and political incorrectness.

In order to initiate the debate on some issues related to AGRODEP as an initiative, the facilitator used provocative statements about modeling skills in Africa, AGRODEP, and IFPRI. This exercise was used to explore the diversity of opinions with regard to various issues around AGRODEP and to set the basis for open discussion throughout the entire workshop.

Participants had an opportunity to discuss expectations and fears regarding AGRODEP. The key expectations emphasized by the participants were commitment to public goods, a clear roadmap and timeline, and follow up after workshop. The participants also expressed concern about the potentially heavy focus on modeling.

In terms of anticipated outcomes from the workshop, the participants identified the following: i) a common understanding of AGRODEP as a consortium with its vision, focus, and scope; ii) clarity on AGRODEP's strategy, components, and activities; iii) clear modalities of operations and working relationships; iv) clear understanding of expectations from members and their benefits, roles, and relationships; v) concrete way forward with clear initiatives and plans; vi) improved networking among members. This discussion was followed by a presentation of the workshop flow and a program overview by the facilitator.

2. Understanding the Evolution of AGRODEP

Dr. Ousmane Badiane gave a presentation about the inception process of AGRODEP, the challenges along faced along the way, and AGRODEP's future role and objectives. He emphasized the role of AGRODEP in creating an environment for the development of an African agenda. Dr. Badiane also talked about the role that AGRODEP members will play and their shared responsibility for AGRODEP's success.

Prof. Antoine Bouët provided an introduction of the goals, major components, and management structure of the AGRODEP modeling consortium. The presentation laid out details about the three major components of AGRODEP:

- (i) Models (coordinated by Dr. David Laborde). A platform for sharing existing core and innovative economic models dealing with sector, national, and international policy issues as well as long-term projections.
- (ii) Data (coordinated by Dr. Betina Dimaranan). A common database platform consisting of a central data clearinghouse with a Web data portal.
- (iii) Network (coordinated by Dr. Ismaël Fofana). A network of members and experts that will allow scientific collaboration, exchange of data, modeling techniques, joint analysis, and strategic debate.

The presentation further noted that the development and success of AGRODEP will depend on the quality of its leadership and governance. The management structure of AGRODEP consists of the following: i) Steering Committee, the main function of which is to discuss and advise the functioning of the AGRODEP initiative and its contribution to capacity building and policy debate in Africa; and ii) Scientific Advisory Board, the function of which will be to provide general scientific guidance to the Project Manager (Prof. Antoine Bouët) and Deputy Project Manager (Dr. Betina Dimaranan).

The presentation provided an overview of AGRODEP's key activities, such as capacity building, grants, workshops, working paper series, etc., and outlined the members' rights (e.g. access to the models, data, and online portal, and participation in the grant program, workshops, and training) and duties (e.g. research contributions, discussion papers, documented database or models, and participation in network activities).

Following the presentation, the participants identified the following as the most critical issues that have to be addressed to make AGRODEP work effectively: i) member selection and evolution; ii) data access; iii) feedback and support to members; iv) sustainability and African ownership; v) policy relevance and influence; and vi) priority themes.

3. The Vision of Outcomes and Impacts of AGRODEP

The discussion about the anticipated impacts of AGRODEP revolved around what different actors (policymakers; modelers and members; regional and national institutions; universities and institutions with modeling expertise; IFPRI and CGIAR) would do or do differently if AGRODEP were to become successful with great impact.

It was noted that policymakers would be specific when expressing needs to AGRODEP, allocate more resources in data collection, and make more evidence-based policy decisions. Modelers and members would provide more responses to policy issues and would be better linked to the needs of policymakers. Regional and national institutions would be willing to fund research projects, undertake more evidence-based decisions at regional levels, and harmonize policies better across borders. Universities and institutions with modeling expertise would produce better training agendas and resources, and would have better research output. Finally, IFPRI and CGIAR would provide a platform for policymakers to express their concerns and issues.

In conclusion, the session emphasized the need for the following: 1) a platform for policymakers to express their issues; 2) distinction between consultants and researchers that rely on scientific evidence; 3) strengthening the linkages between capacity, policy influence and impact through the impact pathways; 4) prevention of the overestimation of modeling impact; 5) a strategy for effective communication, impact, outreach, and partnership; and 6) continuous visioning.

4. Deepening the Understanding of the Components

The elements of each of the three components of AGRODEP were discussed in separate presentations.

i. Models Component

The main goals of the models component are to: i) provide state-of-the-art tools to assemble a dynamic research community that can respond to the emerging and long-term needs of CAADP growth and poverty reduction agenda; ii) create a library of state-of-the-art modeling tools; iii) develop methodologies that are implementable in Africa; and iv) promote innovation by linking African researchers with leading research communities worldwide.

During the first year, AGRODEP aims to have a significant set of models that are ready for use, and fully documented and adapted. This includes simulation models (deterministic, partial equilibrium models), general equilibrium models (single country, multi country), and estimation models (parametric, gravity models, and estimation of supply and demand).

Through the innovations window, AGRODEP aims to: i) adapt existing models to deal with challenges in Africa; ii) promote joint research among African researchers and between African researchers and international networks; and iii) combine short-, medium-, and long-term initiatives.

ii. Data Component

AGRODEP will develop a central data clearinghouse with a Web data portal. Its main goals are: i) to bring together dispersed and disparate statistical, economic, and geospatial data in Africa; ii) to provide links to existing key data sources; iii) to develop shared standards, formats, and exchange protocols; and iv) to train AGRODEP members on database construction to ensure future developments.

Cross-cutting activities in the data component include priority setting in data collection efforts, data stocktaking, development of data standards and protocols on data acquisition, archiving, metadata, quality control, dissemination, contacting data sources\ negotiating access, and identifying data experts and collaborators.

iii. Network Component

The discussion of the components centered around the ingredients for productive networking which were identified as the following: i) a specific and clear purpose; ii) limited number of issues; iii) platform around common challenges; iv) common framework, different models; v) broader approach to economic modeling; vi) continuous and extensive support; viii) strong partnerships; ix) information sharing; and x) networking facilitated by institutions.

5. Prioritizing themes in AGRODEP

Following a brainstorming session on what should be the priority themes for AGRODEP, the participants agreed that the topics emerging from the CAADP compacts should guide theme prioritization since modeling activities have to feed directly into these processes. The analysis of the CAADP Compacts brought out the following topics: i) food security through production and productivity; ii) integration of domestic and international markets; iii) rural infrastructure; iv) natural resource management and risk coping with vulnerability; and v) governance and institutions.

6. Dealing with Cross-Cutting Aspects of AGRODEP

Each guided by a set of specific questions, five groups engaged in more in-depth review of the following key issues: i) modeling and innovation, ii) impact strategy and partnership, iii) networking, iv) member selection and sustainability, v) data component.

i) Modeling and Innovation

Two major challenges were identified: i) matching topics and issues with models, and ii) innovation. Information should be organized so that users obtain appropriate guidance as to which models to use and what modifications to implement. Participants emphasized the importance of engaging members in discussion and consultation when setting priorities, and for AGRODEP management to design a consistent plan on how to prioritize.

In terms of what could be considered realistic achievements in the modeling component, the participants noted the following: i) starting with a set of thoroughly-documented models and example data, ii) assembling a team of researchers who are comfortable with a range of models in the library, iii) and developing online material for training, along with CDs and electronic documentation.

ii) Impact Strategy and Partnerships

The expected impacts of AGRODEP include reduction of asymmetric information, better market information, better policies enacted, improved confidence in technical advice, and improved M&E systems. The “allies for impact” include various units such as Planning and Statistical Unit in Ministry of Agriculture, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Planning, and Coordinators of RESAKSS nodes. Other allies include CAADP focal points, donors, international civil society, media/press/communications outlets, RECs, universities & research centers, farmer organizations, and regional and sub-regional units. The group also explored strategies to manage partnerships, ensure continuity, and institutionalize the way in which the modeling results provide feedback to the processes in which they can make a difference.

iii) Networking

Some of the challenges that were identified by the networking group concerned producing high quality outputs and ensuring that the outputs impact policymaking and that members share their ongoing projects and activities.

In terms of milestones, the group discussed the importance of expanding membership to a critical mass, taking stock of members’ and institutions’ expertise, making the database and library of models available, setting up online communication among members and partners, establishing clear guidelines for members, designing a questionnaire to better understand members’ needs and aspirations based on their current and future activities/projects, and developing a framework to launch a call for proposals early in the second year.

iv) Member Selection and Sustainability

Possible ways of announcing AGRODEP’s recruitment of new members would be through the AGRODEP website as well as information transmitted to heads of department in universities and institutions, a listing of research centers in each country, the African Economic Research Consortium website (and websites of other African research units), and a contact list at IFPRI. It was also stated that the selection process for the next round should encourage non-CGE specialists and have a balanced country and gender representation, etc. The selection criteria should include Africa-based researchers, completed (or in progress) doctoral degree (or combined Masters Degree and proven technical skills), and defended Ph.D. thesis within the last fifteen years. The group also discussed the process of possible member de-selection.

It was agreed that members have a duty to contribute to the public goods in terms of modeling and database, participation in the network activities and publications, or both. The incentives to ensure member sustainability include capacity building, networking, funds, access to data and models (web portal), etc.

Within the first year, the participants expect the Web data portal and models repository, training sessions, grant programs, and a one day event with general presentation of different techniques and themes.

v) Data Component

Data quality and data sharing were mentioned as the main challenges in this component, and training workshops were among the main choices to deal with such challenges. The following activities can be conducted with the help of AGRODEP partners: stocktaking of data, data generators, and data experts; maintenance of database of experts; commissioned papers and training sessions on data topics.

The data activities during the first year include establishing a data warehousing structure; identifying experts on data tools and topics; taking stock of available data from researchers, national and regional agencies, international agencies, and existing major data initiatives; developing standards and protocols on data acquisition, metadata, quality control, harmonization plans; identifying data gaps and setting data priorities.

7. Perspectives on AGRODEP by Partners, Members, IFPRI, and Guests

Grouped according to their role in the workshop (members, partners, IFPRI staff, other guests), the participants discussed concerns and issues regarding their role in AGRODEP. Some of the issues identified by members included communication with each other, grants to attend training and conferences organized outside AGRODEP, facilitation of publications, definition of the research, and representation in the steering committee. The partners raised the issue of membership criteria and the need to clarify the roles of different actors (members, partners, steering committee, etc) and the process of funding.

8. Workshop Evaluation and Closure

At the end of the workshop, participants had the opportunity to evaluate the workshop by stating what they liked, what they did not like, and what they think should happen next time. Among other aspects, the participants liked the openness and informality of the workshop, which made them feel comfortable expressing their views. They also liked the group approach, the sequencing of the workshop with flexibility in the agenda, and excellent workshop facilitation that encouraged engagement. On the other hand, they thought that there was too much work within the condensed time frame. In addition, the participants suggested that the next workshop should be bilingual to increase effectiveness, include policymakers, and ensure greater member participation.