

Strengthening decision-making on Sustainable Agricultural Intensification through Multi-Stakeholder Social Learning

Briefing paper

27 May 2020

At a glance

- Increasing demands on agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa mean that policy and investment decisions become more complex. Despite growing consensus on the need for sustainable agricultural intensification (SAI), there is limited consensus on how to achieve this in practice. Decision-makers need evidence and tools to improve their decision-making in the face of such complexity, but biases affect how evidence is chosen and used.
- Multi-stakeholder, social learning processes offer an innovative approach to improve national level policy and investment decision-making on SAI and other issues, through contributions to actor and network capacity as part of the good governance of the evidence system.
- Donors and other actors can support national level decision making on policy and investment by recognising the importance of the evidence governance system and investing in strengthening it, in addition to funding good quality research.

Introduction

There are increasing demands on agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. Consensus grows on the need for sustainable agricultural intensification (SAI) (Haggard et al, 2018), but how to achieve it is more challenging. Decision-makers need tools and evidence to improve their decision-making, but biases affect how evidence is chosen and used, amidst varying levels of contestation and complexity involved. Research evidence is not always available, appropriate, or effectively used. The quality of evidence is important, but so is the quality of the system that governs evidence, i.e. that ensures that the evidence generated is appropriate, but also that the *system* is democratically accountable (Parkhurst, 2017). The DFID Sustainable Agricultural Intensification Research and Learning in Africa (SAIRLA) programme¹ funded SAI-related research and multi-stakeholder, social learning (MSL) processes, through National Learning Alliances (NLAs) in Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia, to link research evidence to decision-making and improve overall decision-making processes. The NLA facilitation teams brought together diverse stakeholders from government, research institutions, civil society, media, and donors, organising regular learning events as part of learning cycles.

This briefing presents lessons from a study of the SAIRLA MSL processes. The theory of change (see Figure 1) anticipates that MSL processes are guided by NLA facilitation teams leading to enhanced individual, network and senior decision-maker capacity and practice changes, more common understanding, improved decisions, better decision-making processes, and evidence-based governance systems.

¹ For further details, visit <https://sairla-africa.org/>.

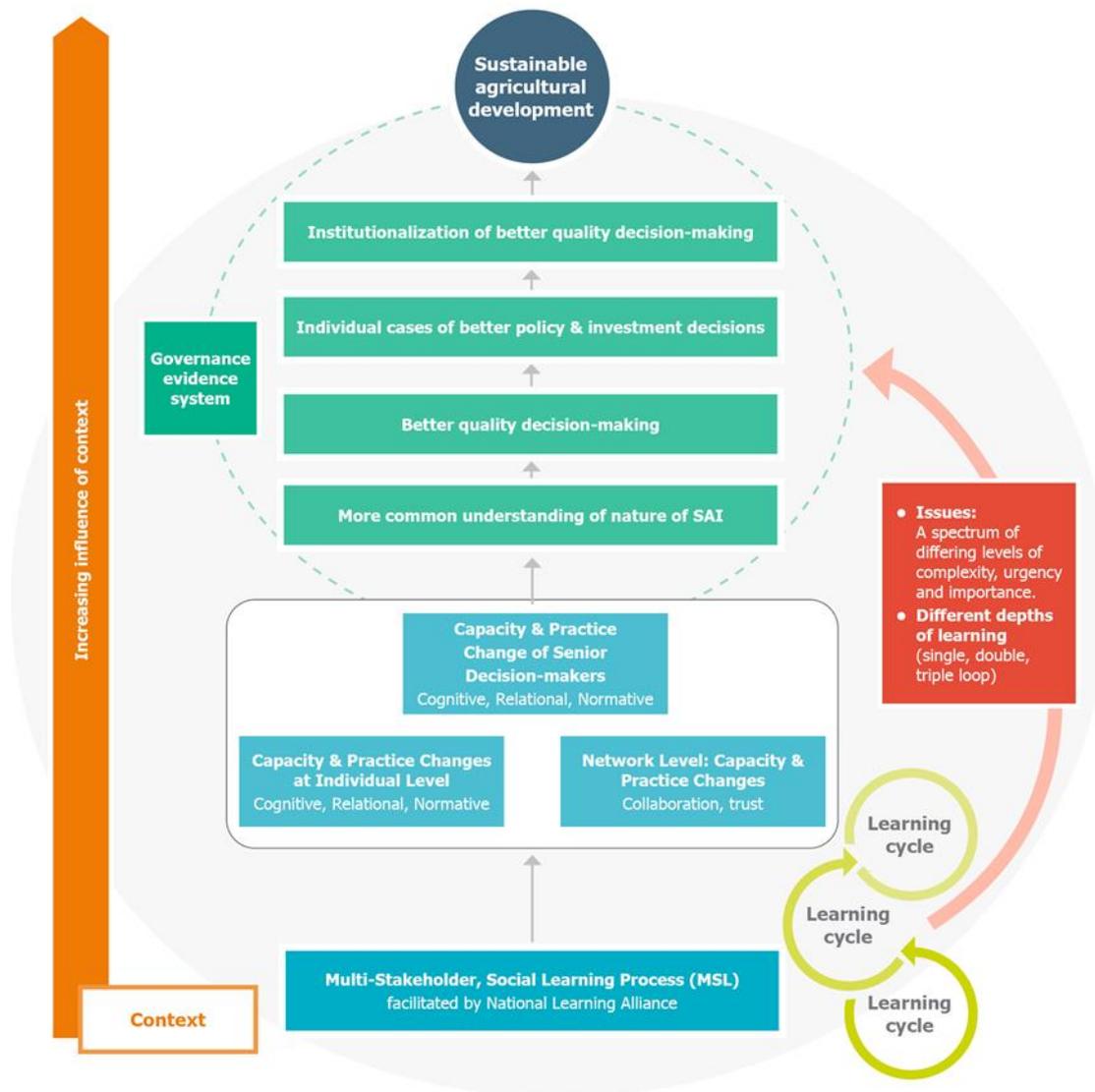


Figure 1: Theory of Change for Multi-Stakeholder, Social Learning (MSL) facilitated by National Learning Alliances.

Findings

Multi-stakeholder, social learning processes were effectively facilitated by NLAs in all five countries. There was an evolution from open dialogue to the inclusion of more decision-oriented, deliberative learning themes, with more intense periods of activity in the third year. Generally high satisfaction was reported by participants, although greater influence over the agenda was desired. There were varying degrees of consistency in membership amongst the NLAs.

Significant changes were seen in capacity and practice. There is strong evidence that individual capacity change occurred, although with country variation. There was improvement in knowledge and skills on SAI, relevant to the national context and priorities. The ability to use SAI-related tools and appropriate evidence improved, and the quality and diversity of relationships were strengthened. Examples of shifts in the mindsets, norms, and values of key individuals emerged². Individuals from all stakeholder groups provided concrete examples of changes in the way they did things. For example, journalists prepared much better-informed articles on agricultural issues, extension workers incorporated SAI trade-offs concepts into other projects and private sector representatives expressed commitment to consideration of environmental and social, as well as economic factors in agriculture. Changes in senior

² 79 per cent of NLA members reported that their level of respect for the views of others and the diversity of stakeholders with whom they have relationships had improved significantly or substantially. 71 per cent of NLA members assessed that their commitment to act on SAI issues had increased significantly or substantially.

decision-maker capacity and practice also occurred, although the level of engagement varied significantly. Where senior decision-makers did participate, many reported significant changes in personal capacity, developing strong ownership of the NLA and valuing the opportunity to engage with diverse stakeholders through an informal network. Significant outcome changes emerged in ten cases (with varying scope of ambition). Box 1 presents three examples.

Box 1: Outcome cases: capacity → practice → systems

Building on science-based strategies to create wider understanding and ownership of more integrated approaches to Fall Armyworm (FAW) Management, Ghana. The NLA collaborated with a formal government taskforce responding to the FAW outbreak, and broadened stakeholder understanding of pesticide issues and the range of possible responses, including more integrated approaches. This contributed to a shift in national action planning and expenditure from chemical pesticides to biorationals. Wider interest in the approach was signalled for other pests and on other agricultural challenges in Ghana and elsewhere in sub Saharan Africa.

Strengthening capacity for policy implementation – ICT for agricultural extension, Ethiopia: Stimulated by the sharing of a digital tool being developed by a SAIRLA research partner, the NLA engaged with senior government extension staff, strengthening the capacity of government, private and broader stakeholders to operationalise policy on information and communications technology (ICT) for agricultural extension services for smallholders. The latter is seen as being increasingly critical for achieving SAI amongst smallholders. The approach has now been shared through the African Forum for Agricultural Advisory Services network.

Facilitating a constructive dialogue on ways forward on highly contested customary land registration, Malawi. District piloting of the new Customary Land Act (2016) began with rising concerns and polarised stakeholder views. The NLA facilitated a new approach (a structured series of land dialogues involving diverse stakeholders at community, district and national levels) to explore the issue, allowing competing value sets to be shared and constructive solutions to be sought, and starting to overcome the antagonistic forms of communication between polarised groups (especially government and traditional leaders).

Early signs of systemic changes were identified with respect to common understanding of SAI and SAI-related decisions, and in the broader decision-making process and governance of the evidence system. The NLAs contributed to a more common understanding of SAI, by introducing relatively new concepts to agricultural stakeholders, especially notions of trade-offs and tools for their analysis and management. However, there was limited joint interrogation of the concept of SAI compared to others occupying a similar space (for example, climate smart agriculture, agroecology, African green revolution), diluting the NLA’s contribution. A similar MSL process may be needed to enable a more common agreement about the future of agriculture at the national level. Beyond understanding of SAI, the NLAs contributed to improved decision-making processes / the governance of the evidence system. Box 2 below provides an analysis of the early signals of improvements in the governance of evidence on SAI-related issues focused on by the NLAs.

Box 2: Contribution to better decision-making (governance of evidence system)

Appropriateness of evidence improved by involving diverse stakeholders across scales (local, district, national levels), to co-identify learning themes of social concern and co-generate co-owned solutions: e.g. public, private and other stakeholders engaged in ICT for Extension Services in Ethiopia.

Stewardship of evidence was enhanced by enabling interactions between the informal NLA network and formal government entities (government taskforces, parliamentary committees etc). NLAs lack a public mandate, but they demonstrate how non-state actors can support greater scrutiny of evidence bias.

Representation in evidence systems broadened. Decision authority remains with public officials, but democracy and evidence capacity levels vary, and donors have a strong influence. NLAs successfully expanded policy space participation and sometimes facilitated deeper learning.

Transparency of evidence use increased by broadening stakeholder participation and building trust, allowing greater information disclosure and debate. For example, on equity and environmental issues in district budgeting processes in Tanzania and through knowledge-based media reporting on the FAW outbreak in Ghana.

Deliberation on evidence enhanced by sharing of diverse value sets and demonstrating the value of such processes to government decision-makers. For example, land dialogues on customary land registration in Malawi and Zambia created safer spaces enabling sharing of competing values and starting to overcome antagonistic communication and positions.

Contestability of evidence was improved, the NLAs facilitated safer spaces providing more opportunities for stakeholder scrutiny of evidence and for challenging accepted approaches in policy formulation. e.g. The FAW taskforce considered a wider range of evidence on human health and environmental impacts in Ghana.

Quality and rigour of evidence: The NLAs did not seek to generate evidence, but they created spaces for reflection upon scientific and other evidence and experience, including from SAIRLA research projects.

Lessons

Lesson 1: The NLAs were responsive to strong and varying demands from senior decision-makers and a wide range of agricultural stakeholders for MSL processes to address agricultural issues. Senior decision-makers and other stakeholders highly valued the individual capacity strengthening achieved, including cognitive (understanding, skills), relational, and normative (norms and values) capacity, with the latter two being most highly valued by stakeholders and associated with the biggest changes.

Lesson 2: The informality of the NLA network attracted senior decision-makers and provided a link with more formal decision-making processes. Senior civil servants and elected representatives valued the safe space for open discussions offered by the informal NLAs. Effective linkages developed with more formal decision-making entities and processes, such as departmental meetings, taskforces, parliamentary committees, and government-led strategy development processes. Decision-makers valued both drawing on the network and sharing with it, especially when their goals and those of the NLA aligned.

Lesson 3: NLA processes are effective when they bring a strongly diverse set of stakeholders, values, and ways of knowing to the framing and co-design of learning activities, especially when they reach across scales. Contestation over policy is often rooted in competing values, as much as technical challenges, requiring new ways to bridge and integrate values. The collaborative learning achieved through the NLAs reached across organisational and stakeholder siloes, between scales (national, district, local), and across types of knowledge (scientific, expert, situational). Engaging under-represented stakeholders (for example, media, traditional authorities, private sector actors, elected female government representatives) in MSL processes is fruitful if they are actively engaged in joint learning.

Lesson 4: To enable constructive contestation in MSL processes it is important to build trust and create safe spaces. There are variations in levels of trust and confidence to speak freely, but there are widespread challenges. To allow constructive contestation it is important for MSL processes to reinforce trust-building and create safe spaces on all types of issues, but especially for contested topics such as land. In Malawi and Zambia, the NLAs showed how it is possible to refresh the framing of a problem as a step towards accommodation and bridging of competing value sets.

Lesson 5: Combining learning cycles that balance broader dialogue process with focused, deliberative learning requires skilful facilitation and tailoring to local contexts. A broader dialogue process allows a flow of communication where the conversation can take many directions and conclude with diverse representation of voices and issues, building local ownership. Shorter learning cycles are more oriented to deliberative decision-making and can help to demonstrate progress and build belief among participants and funders. Through an iterative process, insights from the deliberative learning themes are reflected upon in the broader process. MSL processes are less effective and dissipate energy when they raise expectations without delivering visible benefits. Some NLAs experienced periods when implementation slowed, but overall momentum was largely sustained or regained when activities increased

and benefits were realised. MSL involving experiential learning, such as joint field visits, are highly valued by participants, and helped to catalyse action at senior national levels.

Lesson 6: Facilitating the interplay between learning cycles and attracting and engaging diverse stakeholders at the national level is highly demanding, intensive and requires an appropriate leadership style. The NLAs are led by a facilitation team which combines diverse skill sets and attributes, including the lead facilitator(s), communications experts, monitoring and evaluation staff and gender specialists. Participants need to be guided to co-identify and examine sometimes sensitive issues or to act upon new opportunities. The process requires dedication, patience, time and energy to overcome uncertainties and pitfalls.

Lesson 7: Internalising MSL processes focused on national decision-making takes time and uncertainties as to the exact direction of an organically evolving process can be high. Building and sustaining trust, ownership of and belief in the process is critically important. Strategies are needed to build confidence in the process e.g. through monitoring and reporting on achievements, delivering shorter-term wins, and communicating the overarching principles and interlinked types of cycles from the outset to help participants to rapidly catch the deeper meaning of the approach so that they can then own it themselves and take it forward.

Lesson 8: Beyond the different features of MSL processes there are enabling structures and conditions which can have a major influence on the effectiveness of MSL processes. The managerial infrastructure of participating organisations and funders is pertinent (for example, outcomes orientation, flexibility in budgeting and financial systems, appropriate human resources, and performance assessment systems). Enabling learning within the organisations of NLA participants was not a specific goal of the NLA processes, and there are pros and cons to consider regarding formally engaging organisations rather than individuals.

Pathways for future support

Enhanced focus on the overall evidence governance system, as well as on scientific evidence generation. Donors and other stakeholders should give more consideration to the wider governance of evidence systems, funding improvements through informal networks, building relationships and collaborative engagement, thereby adding value to their investments in high quality research. Stakeholders, such as researchers and media, should recognise themselves as part of, and not external to, governance systems, to contribute to transdisciplinary approaches to solving complex challenges. There are risks of dominance by more powerful groups, but in contexts of democratic states, and if well facilitated, MSL processes can enable diverse stakeholder participation in problem identification and joint exploration of solutions.

Donors can play a role in improving the quality of the evidence governance system by strengthening in-country capacity for MSL. However, a flexible, adaptive approach is required. There is relatively limited in-country organisational capacity to support informal networks aiming to improve the good governance of evidence. This could be an important role for funders, but flexible funding is needed to accommodate uncertainty. The NLAs are all exploring differing routes to sustainability, but available funding sources tend to shy away from adaptive, flexible processes, because of the uncertain results, despite growing demand for the better governance of evidence. The risk is that the NLAs will only be able to obtain project-based funding which pulls them away from an open agenda and into specific themes identified up front and externally, rather than more broadly defined good governance of evidence outcomes. How research is funded also has a major influence on researchers' opportunity and ability to contribute to the good governance of evidence.

Acknowledgements

The opinions expressed in this briefing are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of DFID. Readers are encouraged to quote and reproduce material. In return, SAIRLA requests due acknowledgement and quotes to be referenced as follows:

Lamboll R., Nelson V., and Mansfield D. (2020) 'Strengthening decision-making on Sustainable Agricultural Intensification through Multi-Stakeholder Social Learning'. SAIRLA Briefing Paper, Chatham: Natural Resources Institute.