

The SDC Agriculture and Rural Development Network

Preliminary remarks

The “Federal Council Dispatch on the Continuation of Technical Cooperation and Financial Assistance for Developing Countries” adopted by Parliament in 2008 restored Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) as **one of the ten priority issues** of the Swiss development cooperation.

During SDC’s headquarter reorganisation process, the “Global Program for Food Security” (GPFS) was created to join in with international efforts to tackle sustainable, productive and competitive agriculture together with long term food security. Within SDC, **GPFS has been assigned the thematic responsibility** for agriculture and rural development.

The former thematic sections were dissolved. All thematic work and responsibilities were integrated into operational entities of the institution. This brings the thematic issues closer to the operations in the partner countries and institutions, and should facilitate interaction between bilateral and multilateral work as well as between operational and policy levels. It was also felt necessary to link the dispersed thematic knowledge bearers within several **institution-wide networks**.

SDC is a small donor in financial terms. Nevertheless, it can make a difference and be useful to its partners essentially through the quality, the continuity and the contextual and thematic relevance of the programs it supports, as well as through its contributions to a meaningful and inclusive thematic and policy dialogue at all levels. Therefore, **consistent know-how, relevant knowledge and proven competence of SDC’s personnel** are all the more important to the institution.

That is why **knowledge exchange and learning is the main purpose** of SDC’s newly created thematic networks. They should become an effective tool to identify existing thematic knowledge and best practices within the institution, to mobilise these efficiently and flexibly and to renew, enrich and adapt them continuously to specific situations and needs. This will allow SDC to keep pace with dynamic environments and to foster its capacity for innovation and quality.

What does the ARD-network exist for? Its main functions

Most of the following remarks are suitable for networks in general. We have applied them here specifically to SDC’s Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) network.

Firstly, the ARD-network deals with **information**:

Making relevant information available and easily accessible to all its members is key to any network. Skilfully prepared information is even more useful.

Secondly, the ARD-network deals with **knowledge**:

According to IFPRI¹, knowledge can be defined as organized or processed information. It can be tacit (recurrent interaction in specific contexts) or codified (partly transferable and universal), as well as “indigenous” or “scientific”. SDC’s ARD-network is composed of knowledge-bearers. All of them have some thematic knowledge to share and all of them are encouraged to be interested in learning from their peers. The function of the network is to

¹ Kwadwa Asenso-Okyere, Kristin Davis, Dejene Aredo, Advancing Agriculture in Developing Countries through Knowledge and Innovation, IFPRI, November 2008

facilitate access, circulation and generation of ARD and food security-related knowledge among its membership and beyond.

Thirdly, the ARD-network deals with **learning**:

Learning in a network occurs by using, accumulating and processing knowledge. In SDC's ARD network, learning happens through both electronic and face to face interaction among peers on ARD and food security related topics (sharing one's knowledge with others in making it understandable and useful to them, picking up knowledge from others and using it). Learning also happens through self-study (reading, consulting web sites, using and processing information, creating links between received information).

Fourthly, the ARD-network strengthens **capacities for innovative action**:

Knowledge sharing and fostering of thematic learning lead to a better understanding, new insights and inspiration, which should enable and stimulate the network members to engage in improved and innovative action at both the operational and policy levels.

Fifthly, the ARD-network encourages **advocacy**:

Advocacy and lobbying are also primary functions of a network. The ARD-network offers a forum for strategic ARD and food security concerns within SDC and beyond. It develops arguments that enable its members to advocate at the national, regional and international levels for ARD and food security issues in order to influence on the policy debate and to create greater awareness, understanding and sensibility for agriculture, rural development and food security among decision makers and within the larger public.

What does the ARD-Network aim at? Its two overarching objectives

Our first overarching objective is that better understanding, new insights and increased commitment and capacity for innovative action through ARD-network activities contribute to more **relevant, coherent and effective ARD operations and ARD policy interventions**.

Our second overarching objective is that ARD-network activities facilitate intensified and **fluid interaction and synergy between operational and policy levels** and ensure the link between the GPFS and the operational divisions. On one hand, the network should enrich the international and regional policy level debate with substantial and field-proven knowledge. On the other hand, the network should inform the operations level of important international and regional policy processes and help to increase the scope of important findings, relevant field experience and best practices.

The ARD-network is bound to produce **results** on the output and outcome levels in relation to these overarching objectives. This happens essentially by enabling network members to enhance their professional performance through a better understanding of key ARD topics and processes in their specific context and at the international level, and by facilitating their steady access to updated knowledge and expertise.

What can the ARD-network be useful for? Some activities²

Networks can develop a variety of useful activities. Here we address some of them we think of as being important for the ARD-network³ immediately and in the not too distant future. These activities are directly related to the functions of the ARD-network described above.

With regard to **information**, the ARD-network is expected to, e.g.

- make available to its members and other interested persons important information on general ARD-related policy processes at the global and regional levels (summaries, etc.)
- keep members up-to-date on main ARD initiatives, publications and events;
- facilitate access to all kind of ARD-related SDC documents and to expertise on ARD topics at operational and policy levels;
- serve as a dynamic information and exchange platform for any question, idea or suggestion members might have concerning ARD topics;
- etc.

With regard to **knowledge and learning**, the ARD-network is expected to

1. transmit thematic and methodological know-how from its members, to its members and beyond, e.g. through

- organising and/or offering courses and events on ARD-related topics and methods;
- encouraging on the job training, supporting members in challenging situations;
- writing papers on topical, sensitive and controversial issues;
- peer review: position papers;

2. offer advice to the operational units of SDC from its members, to its members and to other SDC staff, e.g. through

- participating actively in evaluations (network-members as part of evaluation teams, support for preparation of evaluations, for implementation of recommendations, etc.);
- providing advice in planning processes (support in early stages, cross-reading of entry and strategic credit proposals, ARD-sensitiveness of country strategies, etc.);
- continuing thematic operational advice and support between and to COOFs and HQ;

3. capitalise on experiences and on best practices from its members, to its members and beyond, e.g. through

- capitalising on successful and failed programs/partnerships, etc., as well as analysing existing examples of capitalisation;
- enhancing and strengthening SDC's ARD-knowledge base (conclusions and recommendations extracted from the capitalisation work; "compendium of good practices"; ensuring analysis of and access to cumulated ARD-knowledge in SDC).

With regard to **advocacy**, the ARD-network is expected to, e.g.

- contribute to a good understanding and an enhanced sensibility of SDC staff and management for the role of ARD in development and cooperation;

² This chapter summarizes the third regular meeting of headquarter-based network-members in May 2009. A meeting memo is available. Points 1 to 3 in italic script are mentioned in SDC's directorate guidelines for networks and focal points.

³ "ARD-network" means all network-members who are competent in a specific topic, knowledge field or situation, respectively all network-members and other persons who are looking for suggestions, feedback, ideas or information. According to the subjects to be addressed, each member can be in a position to provide support, answers or comments, or to look for them within their peer group.

- contribute to the policy dialogue within SDC: to foster a better consolidation of the restoration of ARD as a main priority in the Swiss development cooperation;
- contribute to the policy dialogue beyond SDC, at the national, regional and international levels (consultation processes, platforms, conferences, meetings, personal contacts, etc.)
- participate in SDC's "Report on effectiveness" of ARD-programs;
- etc.

How does the ARD-network function? Basic principles, tools and resources

During the launch of the ARD-network in January 2009, some general networking principles were presented and discussed. The particular importance of a suitable balance between contributions of the members to the network activities and of benefits for the members from the network activities has been highlighted ("**give and take**"). Access of all members to **information according to transparent rules** is key, as are continuously clarified, adapted and developed **communication** practices. Usually, networks are self-organised structures and it is up to their members to assign tasks and establish rules of functioning and communication within the network and outside. This is partly true for SDC's networks which organise and function according to a basic structural design predetermined by the institution (see the following chapter "What is the ARD-networks structure?"). Perhaps the most important principle of networking is the **ownership** of the network members which determines whether or not a network is useful to them and thus successful. There is a variety of experiences with networks as well as "communities of practices", which are a special form of networks. To get an idea please consult www.communityofpractice.ch.

The following additional **working principles of the ARD-network** have been established so far:

- **Work in a demand oriented manner**, though the demand needs to be stimulated through a "smart" offer.
- **Take advantage of key issues in the "field"**, such as new developments and important events at the national, regional and international levels.
- **Take advantage of SDC key processes**, such as cooperation strategy elaboration, ARD-related entry proposals, strategic credit proposals evaluations.
- **Foster active exchange among practitioners**, especially with and among COOF-based members and South-partners.
- **Seek collaboration and synergies** with other international or regional ARD and food security related networks and with other SDC thematic networks.

Based on these principles, the ARD-network will further elaborate its internal rules and working principles and assign specific tasks to its members in order to ensure the smooth and efficient functioning of the network. This is work in progress (see also the chapter "Next steps forward").

As far as the **tools** which support networking are concerned, it was decided during the second regular HQ-meeting in February 2009 that the network should run a Dgroup and a Website. So called network wide "Face to Face meetings" are also planned. They bring together all network members for a lively formal and informal exchange on specific network

and ARD-related subjects. Experience shows, that "Face to Face" meetings are the most appreciated and productive (but also the most expensive) communication tool of networks.

In a first step, priority has been given to the **Dgroup** in order to foster network-internal exchange. Of course simple e-mail exchange is also possible, but the Dgroup ensures that current information and documents are properly listed, stocked and accessible to all. The Dgroup is the main network-internal discussion and exchange tool. In the future, network members will be addressed directly through the Dgroup mail server, so please register under the link <http://dgroups.org/sdc/ruraldev>. If you encounter problems with registration, please contact patrick.kalas@deza.admin.ch.

The **Website** (shareweb) is currently under construction. As soon as a draft version is available the link to the ARD-shareweb site will be sent to all of you.

We are planning a first **"Face to Face" meeting** for April or May 2010. The details are in discussion and you will be involved in due time into its preparation. Later on, regional events on more specific topics could also be organised, depending on the initiative and interest of network members.

Concerning the ARD-networks' **resources**, the most important ones are its members with their motivation and willingness to share their knowledge and experience, to stimulate the network debates and to learn from their peers. The more active the members and the more substantial their contributions are, the more interesting the network will be for new members and the more skills and work capacity it will be able to attract and thus enhance its performance. The network also has at its disposal limited financial resources which allow for hiring some moderation/facilitation capacities and skills for content management (Website).

What is the ARD-network's organisational structure? First stages

The ARD-network's internal structuring is just beginning. The structure will become more refined in relation to the network's activities and the needs and expectations of the members. So far, the ARD-network is structured into a **"core group"** and **"regular members"**⁴. The core group's special functions are to assure the animation, steering and coordination of the network as well as the organisation and moderation of the meetings. As mentioned above, all members (depending on their time and interest) are invited to contribute ideas to the network design, disseminate information of general interest, share experience, consult other members to advance their own work, express opinions to specific topics and of course get involved in the more substantial thematic work, discussions and activities.

In the near future, **"learning groups"** or "communities of practices" will be created by members who are interested in working on specific ARD topics or approaches and methods. Depending on the subjects, these learning groups could comprise ARD-network members and their partners, or could expand to include members of other networks. Such interactive learning groups within the networks could become a privileged form of cooperation between thematically close SDC networks. At least one SDC-based ARD working group or community of practice exists already in West Africa and its SDC members are also part of the ARD-network.

What could be the thematic framework of the ARD-network? Some Proposals

The general idea is to work on two tracks that are linked and complementary:

- a **"short term track" which allows for flexibility**, for the seizing of opportunities, for appropriate and timely reaction to internal and external demand and for the

⁴ "Core group": six members, four at HQ, one in COOF Islamabad, one in COOF Kabul. "Regular members": 22, fifteen at COOFs in Asia, Africa and Latin America, seven at HQ. See the annexed list.

participation in spontaneous debates inside and outside of SDC. This track allows for short term thematic diversity and is both institution and member-driven.

- a **“medium term track”** which stresses **in-depth treatment** of selected policy, strategic, or longer term operational issues, knowledge dissemination and capitalisation. This track stresses medium term thematic focussing and is essentially member-driven.

As far as the “short term track” is concerned, an initial gathering of ideas and proposals has been done among HQ-members (see chapter below on “What is the ARD-network doing in 2009 ?). Its implementation is ongoing. Some of the listed activities are poised to be integrated in the “medium track” (e.g. the land question, gender and ARD, others).

As far as the “medium term track” is concerned, the second regular HQ-meeting in February has opened the debate. The following clusters could be of interest for sharing accumulated knowledge and experience, identifying and disseminating best practices, capitalising on lessons learnt, etc. in the medium term⁵:

- 1) **Sustainable production in agriculture, livestock, agro forestry and fishery** on the family farm level, the production systems level, the ecosystems level (approaches, choices, methods, techniques): sustainable natural resource management (soil, water, pasture, forest, biodiversity) in relation with improved production and enhanced productivity. What and how can small farmer and pastoralist families produce to enhance their food security, their assets and incomes while maintaining or improving their surrounding and wider ecosystems? What challenges are they facing with regard to climate change and growing water scarcity or recurrent flooding in certain regions, and how can they adapt and make their farms and farming systems more resilient?

Related SDC thematic networks: Climate change, Water initiatives.

Website links: forthcoming

- 2) **Conservation and processing** of agricultural, livestock and forestry products: how to improve conservation and transformation of products for various purposes, such as reducing post harvest losses; preserving the nutrition values of food products for on-farm consumption; preserving their quality as well as that of non food products (wool, hides and skins, manure, timber, leaves, etc.) for stocking them in suitable conditions in order to commercialise them profitably; adding value in order to receive higher farm incomes; facilitating farm diversification and market access; etc. How can small farmer and pastoralist families acquire the necessary knowledge and improved tools, how can they integrate effectively and profitably into existing value chains?

Related SDC thematic network: Employment and Income (E+I). This thematic cluster is overlapping with the E+I network. A closed cooperation and coordination with E+I is necessary and desirable.

Website links: www.sdc-employment-income.ch

- 3) **Value chains and access to markets**: poverty sensitive investments in infrastructure and rural transportation, access of small farmer and pastoralist families to inputs and credits as well as to domestic, regional and international markets, protection of

⁵ Please note that the following six “clusters” are *not* themes to be dealt with by the network. Rather they represent conceptual elements serving to give a basic structure and shape to the unspecified area of ARD. The descriptions and questions are intended to illustrate what the clusters could comprise. It is up to the network-members to determine what specific themes they want to work on. These themes can be situated within or between the clusters (see also text below, p.7).

domestic and regional markets from unfair competition, fiscal policies and taxes in relation with support to small holder agriculture and pastoralism, questions in relation to value chains, market integration, regional and international trade conditions and regulations in relation with agricultural products, WTO agreements, etc.

Related SDC thematic networks: Employment and Income (E+I), Political Economy and Development (PED). This thematic cluster is overlapping partly with the E+I network and partly with the PED network. A closed cooperation and coordination with them is necessary and desirable.

Website links: www.sdcpoliticaleconomy.ch

- 4) **Knowledge and innovation**: traditional and scientific knowledge; its generation (practical and traditional experience, agricultural research), its transmission (basic education, vocational training, and formal training on different levels), its dissemination (extension and advice: systems, institutions, methods). How can agricultural research serve more effectively small holder and pastoralist families in remote areas? What kind of small holder and pastoralist-relevant agricultural knowledge to generate or to improve and how to transmit and disseminate it effectively? What links and bridges to establish and to strengthen for this purpose (e.g. between research, training and extension) and how to proceed?

Related SDC thematic network: Education

Website link: forthcoming

- 5) **Governance and institutional capacity building**: strengthening of public, professional, and community based ARD-related institutions and partner organisations. How to support them to strengthen their internal governance, foster their professional capacity to act effectively? How to support Farmer and Pastoralist organisations to defend their constituency's interest at the policy level and to get actively involved in the policy dialogue and decision making processes on national, regional and international levels?

Related SDC thematic networks: PED, Decentralisation and local governance

Website links: forthcoming

- 6) **Policy and regulatory frameworks**: pro poor policy frameworks and settings in agricultural/livestock and directly related policies (e.g. environment, trade and fiscal policies), land policies and land governance (land laws, tenure rights, access to land and water, land acquisitions, land use, etc.). How to achieve/improve policy relevance, coherence, implementation, effectiveness? Multi-stakeholder approaches – what kind and how?

Related SDC thematic networks: PED, Decentralisation and local governance

Website links: see above

ARD-relevant approaches and methods for development practitioners, such as the livelihood approach, make working markets for the poor, pro poor growth, etc. and methodological issues such as planning for results, measuring results, developing indicators, reporting, etc. should also be fields for knowledge exchange, mutual support and learning, as well as for capitalising in relation with these six clusters and with specific themes.

Gender as a transversal issue is to be taken into account within all the six clusters.

Related SDC thematic network: Gender

Website link: www.sdc-gender-development.net

As the ARD portfolio inventory⁶ shows, SDC has ongoing programs, projects and partnerships in all these six thematic clusters, though to different extents. The above-

⁶ At the second network-HQ-meeting it was decided to elaborate a complete inventory of all ongoing ARD-programs (co)financed by SDC in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This inventory is now available.

mentioned thematic clusters are interlinked and help to give a general structure to the vast and vague area of ARD. Of course, there is need to be more focused and to split these general clusters into more specific issues and work themes. Concrete subjects and relevant questions identified by network members to be dealt with in learning groups will help to do so. The quintessence, lessons and conclusions should serve to enrich the contents of the clusters and to fill them progressively with substantial, concrete and accessible knowledge.

What is the ARD-network doing in 2009 ? Ongoing and planned activities

So far, about eight HQ-core group meetings and three regular HQ-member meetings have taken place. The network and InterCooperation (Swiss NGO) organized a special meeting concerning the livelihood approach and related programs in Pakistan. Another special meeting on “gender and rural development/employment” is going to be held soon, together with the gender network.

Furthermore, the network participates in important processes at HQ (including the preparation of the “Report on effectiveness”, discussion of entry proposals and strategic credit proposals on ARD in the committee of operations, etc.) and processes and events at the international level (CGIAR, Global Donor Platform on Rural Development, etc.). It has also realised the above mentioned ARD portfolio inventory which serves as a practical working tool and a general basis of information.

A flexible planning tool has been developed. It permits regular adaptation of planned activities, events and products. This tool will be sent to you soon. It would be very welcome and useful if you could participate (e.g. through e-contributions) in activities which concern your field of experience and knowledge, your region, etc., respectively suggest further activities which you would like to engage in.

What are the next steps forward ? Some ideas and suggestions

Top priorities are to:

- integrate all COOF members into the network activities and discussions – this “concept and information paper” is the first step;
- integrate the COOF core-group members and refine the functioning of the core group;
- take decisions on the “mid term” thematic question;
- specify the selected “mid-term” themes, prepare and start thematic work;
- elaborate the network’s work plan for 2010;
- getting on-line with the ARD-Website;
- participate actively in the preparatory work for SDC’s “Report on effectiveness” of ARD-programs

Furthermore, we should:

- define some principles for running the Dgroup;
- establish clear rules on information and communication;
- gather basic information on all network members (training and experience; actual tasks and responsibilities; special interests, know how and knowledge in ARD, food security and related topics; etc.) and make them available within the network
- go ahead with the preparation of the “face to face” meeting.

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