

# the ASSAR SP TLIGHT

Learning

on

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#### November 2016

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#### **Recent Events**

Urban Policy Dialogues at IIHS, Bangalore	10 - 11 November 2016
Transformative Scenario Training Workshop, Ghana	2 - 3 November 2016
Transformative Scenario Training Workshop, Bangalore	18 - 19 October 2016
ASSAR/CSIRO Webinar "Adaptation Pathways From Concept to Practice"	14 October 2016
ASSAR/BRACED Webinar "Experiential Learning in the Climate Change Adaptation Context"	16 September 2016
ASSAR at the Africa Drought Policy Conference, Windhoek	15 - 17 August 2016
ASSAR Consortium Annual Meeting, Addis Ababa	17 - 21 July 2016

### **Upcoming Activities**

Implementation of participatory scenario analysis activities in Kenya	Jan - April 2017
CARIAA Economics Winter School, New Delhi	9 - 13 January 2017
"Experiential learning to better communicate climate change" training workshop	18-20 January 2017
Fieldwork analysis in India, West, East and Southern Africa regions	Ongoing

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# Collaborative research as collaborative learning

#### by Georgina Cundill Kemp

Senior Program Officer Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia International Development Research Center

Collaborative research that involves many partners with diverse backgrounds and interests is challenging. Collaborative research that takes this challenge a step further by also attempting to have an impact on communities, practice and policy is more challenging.

ASSAR aspires to both of these things on a grand scale - across two continents, seven countries and with more than 10 partners and sub-partners. An effort such as this must be recognised for what it is: an experiment from which to learn.

ASSAR is not alone in its aspirations for action-oriented research within large transdisciplinary networks. Such models of research are becoming increasingly common in global environmental change research. Indeed, ASSAR joins a new cohort of research communities who have risen to the challenges posed by climate change by being

prepared to re-think not only how knowledge is produced, but by whom it is produced, where it should be produced, and for what purpose. Recognising this new space that ASSAR is occupying, and indeed discovering together, brings with it the need to find ways to enable teams of researchers and practitioners to work and learn together effectively.

It is one thing, and perfectly acceptable, to 'muddle through' complex projects, learning-by-doing and being adaptive in the face of constant change.

It is another thing altogether to give forethought to how the diffuse learning that happens every day in ASSAR can be harnessed in order to improve how the project is implemented, and the impact of the project, in real time. This is a learning-based approach to large-scale collaborative research, and is the kind of game-changer that pushes the frontiers of transdisciplinary research practice.



From a consortium point of view I' have learnt how valuable it can be to bring diverse disciplinary, geographical and practice perspectives to the same issue. Although challenging to manage and navigate, this diversity helps to develop a much broader and more balanced idea of any problem, and any solution.

Tali Hoffman ASSAR Communications Officer University of Cape Town

Observing the management of such a consortium like ASSAR running across different regions is full of learnings for me.

Amadou Sidibe Postdoctoral Researcher ICRISAT

# Lessons, challenges and opportunities within ASSAR

By Mark New, ASSAR Principal Investigator, University of Cape Town

ASSAR has offered so many valuable experiences and opportunities for learning. I have really appreciated exposure to the wide diversity of problems, contexts and issues relating to development and climate change across the four ASSAR regions. It has personally been very enriching experiencing these different settings, both virtually, and through our various visits and meetings. I have also learned the enormous transaction costs - time, travel, inter-personal - involved in such a large project. One should make sure to have the resources to cover these costs.

The process of going from project concept note to full proposal, and to the implementation of the proposal, has been personally a highly valuable experience. I have learned a lot, and would do many things differently next time round, but it has been a pleasure enabling such a diverse set of people to interact within ASSAR.

In fact, for me, the most enjoyable aspect of ASSAR has been the opportunity to meet, get to know, and learn from all the amazing people in the ASSAR community. In terms of technology, I have enjoyed using Google Drive and Hangouts, but the platform could be used even better.

In terms of challenges, we have inevitably

encountered difficulties within and between research teams. These are due – among other things - to combinations of personality clashes, over-commitment from some team members, yet lack of commitment from others. It is also challenging to ensure that the work happening in each region will produce results that are comparable; the process we went through to define a set of common research questions, while time consuming, opened up the potential for substantive synthesis across regions. The sheer size of the consortium is another challenge. For me, a particular issue is that many in the consortium are not working full time, so coordinating timely contributions across part-timers is particularly difficult.

By the end of ASSAR, first prize for me – as a researcher – would be high-impact synthesis products that really deal with the question of barriers and enablers to adaptation.

As someone who is passionate that research should lead to impact, I would like to see our engagement with the communities we have been working with enabling agency and action within the communities that leads to improved wellbeing and reduced climate stress. ASSAR's contribution to increased capacity of our young researchers and practitioners — and the creation of a cohort of future research leaders — is something else that I really value.

I have learned about collaborative research, anchored by the process of setting up comparable conceptual frames of research. This is important there because significant learning potential between regions, which furthermore the prospect circumvents 're-inventing the wheel'. The second important lesson has been around the ability to engage in dedicated platforms. which has helped knowledge exchange and to build research capacity.

> Amir Bazaz South Asia Research Lead IIHS

I think I have gained an understanding of how difficult it must be to organise such a large project as ASSAR. Not just in terms of achieving the research objectives, but in terms of people politics.

> Claire van Wyk MSc Candidate University of Cape Town

## Heads out of the sand

by Daniel Morchain, Co-Principal Investigator, Oxfam GB

One thing ASSAR can be credited for is helping us get our heads out of the sand. I am exaggerating for the sake of a headline, but I do think we all suffer from this syndrome to an extent. ASSAR has forced us to work with one another even when we haven't always believed in or felt fully comfortable with the approaches others have taken. We have all shown patience, made efforts to build trust, and finally are finding ways to work together in a new, common space. It's been a clash of personalities and organisational cultures, but I think we're navigating the waters and broadening our horizons.

I personally am pushing myself to interact more with researchers and different-minded organisations, both within and outside of ASSAR, to try to learn about new ideas, digest them and bring them to Oxfam in a way that challenges our ways of thinking.

At the same time, the Oxfam team and other non-academic project associates in ASSAR keep promoting stakeholder engagement processes that aim to make the project's research and its findings more representative, impactful and longer lasting than if we followed a more traditional research project approach. For me, the learning is straightforward: we need to be humble and let our rusty assumptions be put to the test.

The other aspect of getting one's head out of the sand is about putting our money where our mouth is. It's easy to preach the values of multi-stakeholder collaboration and interdisciplinary work, but it is so tough to do it at home. Like when a health and safety consultant once visited the office I worked in to check and certify its compliance, and as he gave us his presentation of best practices he tripped and fell on the extension cord he himself had used to plug the projector. Or when a few weeks ago we used PowerPoint slides to advise a group of practitioners on their final project presentations – one specifically instructing them: "Be creative – do not use PowerPoint".

ASSAR has stressed on many of us the need to walk the talk and be transparent, and also to be realistic whilst not holding back on trying to initiate or contribute to processes of change. Things are brewing here and there...

ASSAR, and actually CARIAA, have also served as platforms to get to know smart, generous, influential people working in the same sector through very different entry points. This has been enriching and has already led to collaborations beyond ASSAR.



Two of the most valuable things I have learned in ASSAR are that Research-into-Use needs more creativity and effort than research, and that the success of this team effort requires us to respect diversity of various kinds.

Jagdish Krishnaswamy
Climate researcher
ATREF

One of my key learnings in ASSAR is around working jointly with researchers to make findings more useful and probably used, because using findings is not the primary work of researchers. This is when RiU activities will complete research activities.

Abdoulaye Hamidou West Africa RiU Coordinator OXFAM GB

# What have I learned in ASSAR? What have I not learned...

By Lucia Scodanibbio, ASSAR Project Coordinator, University of Cape Town

If ASSAR was a three-dimensional model, I could look in any direction, maybe even upside down, and not only find lessons learned, but realise that it's not over. We keep making new mistakes, new adjustments and changes, to only realise the need for further modifications, some stepping back when things don't work, sideways to try it another way and further zigzagging as we go along. I also discover new topics, understand known issues better and sometimes, find renewed motivation and passion about something I perhaps knew existed, but had not engaged with before.

If one of the dimensions was content: I have learned. I never heard the term social differentiation before and had not realised that the distinction of gender which is so often where development agencies end, is just the beginning: age, socio-economic status, caste... so many more layers to add on. I did not know that temperature changes are much easier to predict, compared to precipitation variations, or that GCM stands for General Circulation Model, and what that actually was. A world of scenario planning has opened to my eyes, recently augmented by knowledge about adaptation pathways, both so closely linked to bringing transformation about – something I have always been interested in, but that missed the tools or insights for tackling. I didn't know that in academia, resilience, disaster risk reduction, transformation and adaptation are not just terms, but come with huge suitcases of definitions, frameworks and methodologies, and I can't say that I understand this yet. I only know that it is complex, and probably a lot more than I will ever attempt to grapple with.

If the second dimension was managing our ASSAR consortium: *I have learned*. Perhaps the biggest, most recent lesson has been to stop trying so hard. I have realised that in such a complex consortium, where there are multi-layered expectations, objectives, interests and constraints, coupled with limited time on the part of most of those involved, I have to play a continuous game of pushing and releasing. I have to be savvy at identifying the priorities that need the input and action of the multiple, geographically dispersed teams, attempt to spread those out lest they become overwhelming and try to find the best ways to get those requests answered. It may be through pitifully begging emails, a weekly digest packed with urgent deadlines or a stronger word coming from "above".

But for those items which are "nice to haves", I have realised that for now, halfway through the project, space must be left for the researchers to do their research. I have come to understand that this big machine that is the consortium, requires strong action and leadership particularly at the beginning so that a vision, direction and the mechanisms to make it work together, in an oiled and smooth fashion, are established. Once the motor is activated, after spurts, hiccups and early crashes, the best thing for a coordinator to do, is to add some oil and water here and there, but for the rest, let the machine move in the direction it set out.

If the third dimension was managing my personal expectations: *I have learned*. A chain of lessons. I have realised that, unlike previous projects where I held a lot of power through strings of contracts and

potentially withheld payments, through having several full-time workers reporting to me and through full control on the project budget and hence on its activities, I could "successfully" be in charge. In ASSAR, this is impossible. With five independent, self-budgeted, strong-willed institutions who hold sub-contracts with a set of additional organisations. my ability to determine the direction of the project is minimal. I have also learned to be patient. I used to get frustrated at the slow pace of the academics who need vast amounts of time to agree on definitions, questions, frameworks and methods, when I am so action-oriented. I used to think that I was wasting my time in an academic project, that I was not learning much (!) and that this job was not aligned to my future career dreams. And yet, I have learned through being patient that lessons continuously pour in, being rigorous is not so bad after all. I am discovering new fascinating areas of work that I was not even aware of and am building a very interesting network of contacts!

So is the hardship and frustration of organising visas for over 50 people to meet in Ethiopia, India or Botswana for our annual get-together worth it? While a year ago I would have said no, I think my head can now nod.

Read Lucia's previous blog "Breaking the Silence on ASSAR" As part of the gender group, we have tried our best to be supportive, build capacities and work collaboratively. However, often, given the pressures on senior researchers, gender is put somehow on the backburner, so an important lesson has been the absence of prioritisation. As we have been working together as a gender group on research for over a year now - since the short gender training held at UEA in 2015 - which was really helpful in building collaboration and friendship, things are indeed improving, and it's a good feeling.

ASSAR gender focal point and Researcher

University of East Anglia

Working with people from different backgrounds helps to think out of the box: ASSAR gives me the opportunity to work with non-scientists (local communities, policy actors) and include their perspectives into my research. This is important, because it helps to analyse adaptation challenges from different perspectives. I may not do so, while working alone, but being part of a diverse team with varied academic backgrounds is useful in the way that it provides room to see issues from various perspectives as well.

Edmond Totin Researcher, West Africa team ICRISAT Management skills: as team lead for West Africa I have learned a lot about coordinating and managing a team in all aspects. This is important for my career beyond my academic background. I have also continued to gain deeper understandings about the complexities of adaptation, and have had the opportunity to learn more about my key research interests in the social and gender dimensions.

Mary Thompson-Hall West Africa Lead START



# An ASSAR event in South Africa shaped my career path

by Alcade Segnon, ASSAR PhD student, University of Ghana

Immediately after I joined ASSAR as a PhD student, I was involved in an ASSAR event, a two-week <u>training on climate information</u>. The training was organised by the African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI) and the Climate System Analysis Group (CSAG), both based at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

Before undertaking this training, my aim for the end of my ASSAR journey was to become a climate system scientist because this kind of expertise is not common in West Africa, especially in my home country, Benin. Moreover, this expertise will be needed more in the future due to the expected increase in climate variability and change, and its impact on people and their livelihoods.

Therefore I was excited to have an opportunity to learn at the prestigious CSAG which has the latest knowledge in the field. I gained a lot from this training and this new understanding of climate science and information has greatly changed my career path. Through the training, not only did I realise the high degree of complexity in climate science, but also that working as a climate scientist requires accurate data, mentoring and high-tech equipment, none of which are readily available in my country. As a result, I have changed the focus of my studies to farming system modelling and simulation, which better aligns to my agronomy background and will certainly be part of my PhD thesis.

In ASSAR, I have also learned that "one can't save the world alone". One of the strengths of the ASSAR consortium is that it brings together people from different backgrounds from physical to social and applied sciences, but who all have the same goal. Working in a

consortium can also be challenging though. Sometimes I have the feeling that I am losing my independence and progress is slower than I would like to.

# Before ASSAR I had learnt to work independently, but in ASSAR I am learning to work together.

Before I joined ASSAR, I was involved in a multidisciplicollaborative research programme "Convergence of Sciences", involving Benin, Ghana, Mali and the Netherlands. In the water resource management domain where I worked, we were struggling to find a way to bring stakeholders together. The agro-pastoral dam users had different interests and goals which led to the degradation of the shared resource. As a result, we used the innovation platform approach to find a solution, but unfortunately, this collapsed at the end of the programme. If we had known about Transformative Scenario Planning (TSP), we would have perhaps had better results because of its relevance in this type of context - where a common resource has been degraded and all the stakeholders identify the need to do something to change the situation.

Through ASSAR, I have also learned the tremendous possibilities of collaborative work, as offered by Google apps. This has helped me to address a question I had been asking myself for some time about collaborative writing: How do people from different departments, universities, countries and continents manage to come up with a research paper in which everyone has effectively contributed?

Since being involved in ASSAR, I have a new appreciation for the challenges and practicalities of transnational, interdisciplinary, collaborative research. My PhD involved interdisciplinary research but I was in full control of it, which is often not a case in ASSAR.

Chandni Singh Researcher, South Asia team IIHS

The most important lesson from participating in ASSAR has been learning about the TSP as a form of RiU strategy. I find it important because of how it helps to bring different stakes together to discuss common problems with a focus on the future.

Prosper Adiku ASSAR-DECCMA RiU Officer University of Ghana

## A brain overload

By Chandapiwa Molefe, Research Assistant, University of Botswana

The main lesson for me being a part of ASSAR has been learning how to run and implement an adaptation project. Before joining ASSAR I was employed by a number of projects, but it is now clear to me how I can distinguish a project that is solely done for the sake of research and gaining publication, and a research project that aims to influence adaptation. Through ASSAR I have learned that vulnerable communities come first and should be the centre of any research.

My highest point in ASSAR has been when I have been given an opportunity and platform to engage with national and local level authorities. For me, the most important engagements have been with the ASSAR stakeholders at different scales, through key informant interviews, Vulnerability and Risk Assessment workshops, and the Transformative Scenario Planning training. I have gained most capacity in working and engaging with the most senior national level stakeholders. These opportunities have set a pace for my career as a young researcher.

Working in a consortium is resourceful, especially when it comes to sharing opportunities as well as knowledge. The difficulty comes when one has to work with many different agendas and deliverables at the same time. This means we are often stressed and under pressure to overcome the workload or plan for an event or engagement. Sometimes it feels as though

we are ticking boxes when we complete tasks.

What keeps me motivated is that I love what I do. I enjoy working with communities especially, and researchers from a multitude of backgrounds. This has been very exciting and challenging at the same time.

The thrill of an overloaded schedule, and the completion of each task, keep me going. I find it challenging when things get stuck, when you get a no, or less input than expected. While things have not always been easy, I feel that working relations within ASSAR have been improving over time. Especially with the Southern African team we no longer only identify ourselves as representatives of the University of Botswana, University of Namibia and University of Cape Town, but members of the ASSAR team.

I would like to be involved in a project like this again: I want to be conducting research that informs policy and empowers rural communities to adapt to a changing environment and to improve their livelihoods. Within ASSAR, I would be most satisfied seeing the research findings being used towards this aim. I have changed my perspective in that I will no longer be running after publications but be most concerned about positively impacting.



ASSAR's "Stakeholder Engagement" and "Research-into-Use" approaches have been very valuable to me and my research. Approaching stakeholders the way we do in ASSAR adds a great deal of coherence and focus to the engagement process. Also, as a researcher, engagement processes, particularly at the local level, allowed me to interact with stakeholders beyond the restricted data collection methods. This meant that I was more receptive to what I heard in the field. In this regard interactions with Oxfam have been the most valuable. I even used NetMap in the field!

Karan Misquitta
Researcher - South Asia team
WOTR

# Helping academics to put research into use

By Gina Ziervogel, Researcher - Southern Africa team, University of Cape Town

I have been involved in many research projects. Some of them have been really interesting and others less so. Sometimes there are interesting findings that have been published in academic journals. But the ones that I have found most rewarding, are those that have engaged with people on the ground, grappling with daily challenges, where our research projects have had an influence and sometimes an impact. This is not a trivial thing to do. Some projects have had good intentions but the required investment in time and relationships and the contributions that emerged did not shift things much.

The research into use focus in ASSAR has highlighted the importance placed on trying to get academic research taken up in the broader community. Working with an NGO like Oxfam, as part of an academic project, has therefore been a highlight for me.

The other strand that is central to helping to make research useful is ensuring that a wide range of people know what is being done as part of the research project. The focus that has been placed on communications in this project has supported this a lot. I have never been involved in a research project that has dedicated people working on communications.

Communication is a tricky business and often academics are left to their own devices in communicating their material. It is not always a bad thing, but it is often forgotten about or done badly.

If we really want research to be useful, we need to start by engaging people on the ground so we understand their priorities, using that to frame the research and then communicating what the research has found, so that it can be taken up. Ideally the actors you want to influence would have been involved in designing some of the questions and being part of the research process.

But either way, spending time and energy crafting the message to share is important. ASSAR's communication and engagement has been a core part of its strategy - not an afterthought. These are the pieces that will help to ensure that the research we have done might be useful.

One of the most important learnings for me has been around the value of having dedicated RiU specialists to galvanise genuine RiU activity within research teams.

Roger Few
Co-Principal Investigator &
East Africa Lead
University of East Anglia

One of the most valuable aspects for me has been to be able to effectively communicate research findings and have regular engagements with the communities. It has helped me capture the ground issues more clearly that would have otherwise been missed carrying out a regular research study.





# **ASSAR OUTPUTS**

#### Some of the outputs produced by ASSAR in the second half of 2016

#### Report

Vulnerability and Risk Assessment in Botswana's Bobirwa Sub-District: Fostering People-Centred Adaptation to Climate Change



#### Short report

Livelihood vulnerability and adaptation in Kolar District, Karnataka, India: Mapping risks and responses.

#### **Short report**

Preparing for Transformative Scenario Planning (TSP) in Namibia

#### Information brief

How can we better understand and manage the impacts of drought?

#### Journal

Adaptation to climate change or non-climatic stressors in semi-arid regions? Evidence of gender differentiation in three agrarian districts of Ghana.

#### Journal

How do we assess vulnerability to climate change in India? A systematic review of literature









#### Video Clip

Transformative Scenario Planning in ASSAR



#### Video Clip

Research into Use (RiU)



#### Video: Animation

ASSAR Warli animation in Marathi



#### Webinar

Experiential Learning in the Climate Change Adaptation Context



#### Webinar

Adaptation Pathways – From Concept to Practice



# **ABOUT ASSAR**

To date, most adaptation efforts have focused on reactive, short-term and site-specific solutions to climate-related vulnerabilities. As the global impacts of climate change become more clearly understood, so too does the need for people to effectively respond and adapt to these changes.

ASSAR's overarching research objective is to use insights from multiple-scale, interdisciplinary work to improve the understanding of the barriers, enablers and limits to effective, sustained and widespread adaptation out to the 2030s.

Working across seven countries in India, East Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa, ASSAR's research is case study based and strives to integrate climatic, environmental, social and economic change. The dynamics of gender roles and relations form a particularly strong theme throughout our approach.

Each of ASSAR's teams conducts regionally-relevant research focused on specific socio-ecological risks/dynamics. Focal research themes in each region are:

- agro-intensification in West Africa;
- land and water access in East and Southern Africa; and
- land use, land cover and livelihood changes in India.

Over its five-year lifespan (2014-2018), the cross-regional comparison and integration of research findings will enable ASSAR to develop a unique and systemic understanding of the processes and factors that impede adaptation and cause vulnerability to persist.

# **ASSAR PARTNERS**

The international and interdisciplinary ASSAR team comprises a mix of research and practitioner organisations, and includes groups with global reach as well as those deeply embedded in their communities.

#### **LEAD ORGANISATIONS**











#### PARTNER ORGANISATIONS

















ASSAR is one of four hot-spot research projects in the Collaborative Adaptation Research Initiative in Africa and Asia (CARIAA) programme, funded by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID).















