

DeSIRA in a few words

The DeSIRA Initiative (Development Smart Innovation through Research in Agriculture; <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/desira>) supported research and innovation (R&I) for the sustainable transformation of agriculture and food systems in low and middle-income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Through the DeSIRA Initiative, 82 projects were implemented, and several strategic African and global initiatives were supported. With a funding base of €340 million invested by the European Commission and €60 million by European Union (EU) member states, DeSIRA strengthened R&I capacities, fostered co-innovation and promoted policy dialogue to enhance agricultural innovation systems (AIS).

The DeSIRA Initiative focused on using participatory action research, along with local knowledge, to contribute to more productive, climate-resilient and inclusive food systems. It also aimed to generate evidence to improve future interventions and policy making. DeSIRA emphasised co-designing and disseminating climate-smart and agroecological solutions. Capacity strengthening was central, aiming to invest in technical, managerial and functional capacities at individual and organisational levels. DeSIRA supported innovation through multistakeholder approaches involving communities, farmer organisations, non-governmental organisations, private-sector actors, research institutions and development bodies.



Find more information on the DeSIRA Community and publications on lessons derived from DeSIRA projects

www.desiraliftcommunity.org

These multistakeholder R&I partnerships co-designed innovations, paved the way for scaling, contributed to stronger innovation capacities and national AIS, supported improved natural resource management, facilitated market access through stronger value chains and fostered a more enabling policy environment (see 2024 DeSIRA Annual Global Report for more results). DeSIRA's experience highlights the importance of local collaboration and institutional partnerships for responsible innovation in agriculture and food systems. By strengthening partnerships, improving project design and fostering an enabling policy environment, the Initiative demonstrated how strategic planning – supported by explicit scaling strategies, organisational learning and targeted capacity development – can significantly enhance impact and sustainability.

This note presents the main lessons and recommendations from the DeSIRA Initiative (Figure 1), derived from DeSIRA-LIFT activities and publications in support of the DeSIRA Initiative over the period 2021-2025.



Find more information on DeSIRA-LIFT publications www.desiralift.org/resources. In particular the Stories of Change books, Learning Briefs and Perspective Briefs present further details on the lessons and recommendations derived from the DeSIRA Initiative.

Disclaimer

DeSIRA-LIFT (Leveraging the DeSIRA Initiative for agrifood systems transformation) is a service facility supporting the DeSIRA Initiative funded by the European Commission. DeSIRA aims to bridge the gap between research and policy making towards resilient, sustainable and equitable agrifood systems in the Global South.

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1 How to design and manage impactful R&I projects

The design and management of R&I projects deeply influence their contribution to innovation.

LESSONS

A key success factor of projects achieving significant outcomes was the **engagement and involvement of relevant non-research actors** (private sector, farmer organisations, civil society) contributing to innovation at an early stage. For this to happen, successful DeSIRA projects operationalized international R&I partnerships with a clear share of responsibilities, budgets and effective governance mechanisms. In fact, design gaps in some DeSIRA projects hindered their contributions to impact.

Successful DeSIRA projects had a **strong alignment between project goals, consortium partners, project capacities and activities**. Projects with significant outcomes were able to position their contributions on long-term outcome trajectories, in synergy with other initiatives and under a shared vision of innovation needs and expected changes in agrifood systems. This was possible when the project lead organisations managed their DeSIRA projects as part of broader R&I project portfolios.

DeSIRA projects operated on a continuum from research to development, positioning themselves differently along long-term innovation trajectories. However, the majority of innovation-focused projects addressed the early stages of innovation, with a focus on pilot development and the establishment of proof-of-concept. This would call for follow-up phases to assess the potential for scaling innovation.

R&I projects are uncertain by nature. The most successful projects used **effective and flexible Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)** to manage uncertainty and enhance project effectiveness. Continuous capacity development of project managers to navigate complexity, develop managerial tools and communicate with the funder and partners were key to adequately adapt their intervention strategies and facilitate the flexibility of interventions and proactivity of project partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For project implementers/partners

Design participatory action-research and open innovation processes from the start, with relevant partnership architecture and governance facilitating multistakeholder processes and with clear contributions to long-term outcome trajectories. Such an approach requires resources for project and partnership design before the start of the project or to include a first project phase dedicated to such a design.

Include a monitoring, evaluation and learning system from the start, with skilled experts in the project team, that can support regular reflection and adaptive management during the project cycles. Based on a clear theory of change, build towards an exit strategy for a sustainable legacy of project outcomes from the start.

For policy makers/global funders

Support R&I projects by providing an enabling environment for partnerships and by better linking research organisations to innovation processes led by private and non-private actors. National research organisations can leverage funds with private actors, but stable and significant national and international public funding is still required.

Enhance structures and mechanisms to accommodate iterative learning and long-term support to R&I interventions through dedicated projects (e.g. DeSIRA-LIFT), the development of specific methodologies or support for dedicated organisations providing innovation services.

2 How to support multi-stakeholder approaches for co-innovation and sustainability transitions with research contributions

Multistakeholder approaches aiming at putting together knowledge and resources are pivotal for co-designing and scaling innovation.

LESSONS

Multistakeholder collaboration is essential to address the complex challenge of food systems transformation. A diversity of food system actors – from consumers, to researchers, government officials to business leaders – needs to work together, which requires time and trust. Sustainable context-specific innovation mechanisms such as living labs, social incubators, innovation networks or innovation platforms help bridge the gap between research and innovators' needs. DeSIRA projects that built upon pre-existing multistakeholder innovation facilities obtained the most outcomes and impact.

Demand-based **co-innovation approaches, including participatory action-research with local communities and private actors**, required to develop and/or participate in several multistakeholder collaborations at different levels (innovation niche, innovation support services, national agricultural innovation system) addressing specific questions to be able to achieve innovation at scale.

Strengthening functional and managerial capacities of innovation partners contributes to effective uptake and scaling of innovations by fostering co-learning and co-innovation processes. It requires researchers to move beyond the traditional research role of knowledge production or design/test of technical novelties and to develop new skills that foster co-creation of knowledge and collaboration. R&I organisations valorising this diversity of skills were more able to support innovation. Projects with continuous and significant capacity strengthening activities for innovation actors were more successful in supporting innovation processes.

Innovation facilitators able to play a brokering role between the innovation stakeholders **made a difference in building and facilitating efficient partnerships** between different types of organisations and in guiding innovation processes through uncertainties. Dedicated and trained “innovation facilitators” have been a key success factor in several projects, and could also play strategic roles in research organisations and R&I programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For project implementers/partners

Encourage co-innovation processes that involve farmers, researchers and private-sector actors at different levels (innovation niche, innovation support services, national innovation system) by integrating a set of specific interventions at each level to unleash the potential of innovation.

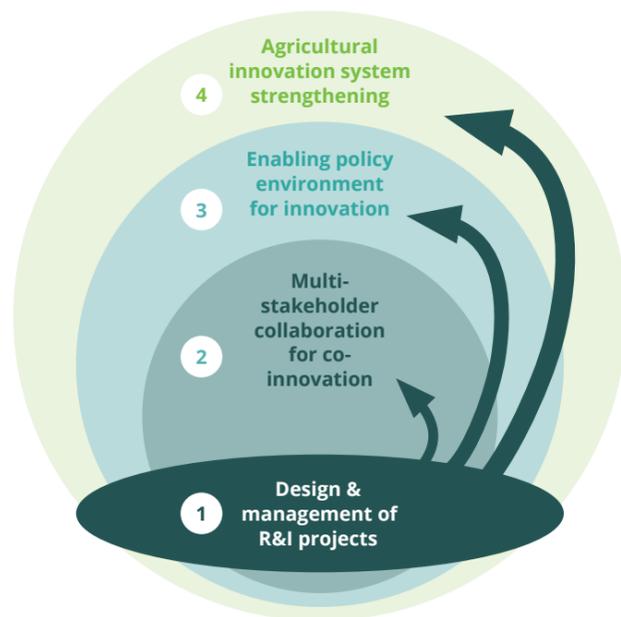
Develop training programmes and business opportunities for innovation facilitators who support innovation processes towards impact. It requires specific skills to build trust and facilitate cooperation among actors. Some facilitators could be part of innovative advisory services, organisations dedicated to supporting innovation or independent service providers.

For policy makers/global funders

Invest in long-term and equal R&I partnerships. Design institutions and funding mechanisms that support long-term R&I partnerships or fund projects at different periods with the aim to maintain the successful R&I partnerships. Ensure alignment between research investments and national innovation priorities by encouraging dialogues between actors.

Facilitate the combination of different types of investments that are necessary for mission-driven and impactful agricultural innovation systems:

Figure 1. Achieving innovation and impact at scale through international R&I projects; lessons from DeSIRA



research infrastructures, multistakeholder innovation facilities, technologies and equipment, human resources and R&I policies.

3 How to support an enabling policy environment for innovation

Policies frame the enabling environment for innovation, requiring specific science policy interfaces to align R&I investments, policy priorities and innovation policy needs.

LESSONS

Policy built on evidence may shape an enabling environment for innovation. Many projects developed activities to share knowledge with policy makers, while only a few designed effective strategies to engage in dialogue with policy makers. In fact, researchers and their partners require improved collective capacities to actively and effectively participate in science-policy interfaces.

Experience shows that policy dialogue is a long-term process that follows its own pace. Projects can contribute to policy outcome trajectories by seizing windows of opportunities to introduce some changes. However, projects are not the best vehicle to support policy changes in the long run.

Strategic alignment between R&I interventions and national policies is necessary to ensure impact. It requires specific mechanisms for dialogue. It also requires policies for innovation that enable new capacity strengthening mechanisms, improve access to private and public funding, and ensure that regulatory frameworks are

conductive to mission-driven innovation. Few DeSIRA projects were designed to address innovation policies, even if it is a promising field for research.

Regional and continental R&I organisations and networks can enhance policy coherence among countries through sharing experiences and can contribute to scale innovations. However, their impact is limited by capacity gaps, highlighting the need to strengthen their ability to engage effectively with national, regional and continental policy processes, while representing their national members and managing convergent or divergent priorities. It requires organisations with clearer views of innovation priorities and targeted changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For project implementers/partners

Embed policy dialogue approaches from the outset and actively engage policy makers in innovation processes. Engage key partners in R&I consortia which have the mandate and competencies for policy dialogue, and strengthen the capacities of researchers to contribute to the process.

Strengthen platforms and networks that preferably already exist and that ensure research organisations, policy actors, farmer organisations and civil society have a seat at the table shaping innovation agendas, research investments and pathways toward sustainable and inclusive agrifood systems.

For policy makers/global funders

Foster inclusive policy dialogues based on participatory and consultative approaches (e.g., foresight, civil society dialogues), mobilising evidence-based lessons and models to build a common vision for innovation (e.g., climate-smart agriculture, agroecology, or other innovative approaches). At the same time, support the design of innovation-driven regulatory frameworks for agrifood system transformation.

For the EU, align international R&I investments with partner countries' policy needs and food system transformation objectives. Continue the partnership with regional, continental and global actors involved in R&I to address the governance of R&I at multiple levels to contribute to joint African Union-EU priorities and to the Global Gateway strategy.

4 How to strengthen agricultural innovation systems

Innovation is embedded and supported by agricultural innovation systems and more specific innovation ecosystems (Figure 2).

LESSONS

New connections with new AIS actors (private firms, start-ups, civil society organisations) **addressing new technologies** (digital tools, biosolutions, bioenergy...) **allowed many projects to better address innovation needs.** DeSIRA projects which strengthened innovation capacities of key leaders and pivotal organisations such as intersectoral bodies or interprofessional organisations were more able to support impactful innovations for sustainability transitions.

Incubators that strengthen social entrepreneurship capacities are among the innovative instruments. Many projects included incubator activities for youth and women or supported existing incubators. However, projects were often unable to provide long-term support due to their time-bound intervention.

Innovation support services like advisory services with innovative approaches are needed to achieve impact at scale. Projects including interventions to engage and strengthen such services managed by farmer organisations or private firms were more successful to contribute to support innovation at scale including agroecological innovations.

Effective and pragmatic multilevel AIS perspectives were often missing from the project intervention strategies. Projects that learnt how to navigate at multiple AIS levels (local innovation niches, innovation support services and national innovation systems), developing a set of coherent interventions at different levels while focusing on their main impact objectives, were more successful in contributing to relevant innovation and scaling.

Access to a diversity of public and private finance to support innovation at different development phases was missing to support the scaling efforts of many DeSIRA projects. Many actors can easily access funds to develop the early phase (test or prototyping). Access to traditional credit exists for formal and large firms. Support for start-up development, small grants for small and medium-sized enterprises innovating in processing or marketing, and funding for risky innovation investments were lacking. Additionally, the actors needed to develop specific capacities to navigate this complex landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For project implementers/partners

Map AIS actors and establish cross-sector partnerships to support knowledge sharing and develop effective partnerships at different levels (niche, innovation service support, national innovation system) to address innovation at scale.

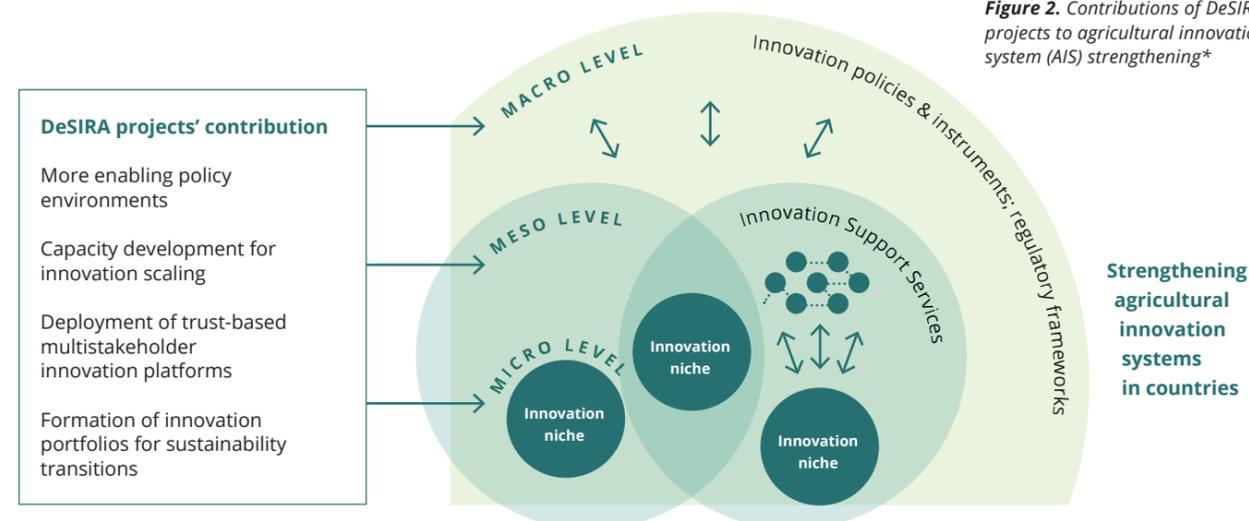
Strengthen public-private partnerships able to mobilise blended finance to support responsible innovation at scale with a specific focus on social inclusion and gender equity, especially in fragile contexts.

For policy makers/global funders

Support the design and implementation of innovative funding mechanisms mobilising public and private actors (banks, philanthropy, etc.) to support innovation from start up to scale up. Invest in capacity building for multistakeholder partnerships and co-innovation including advisory services able to integrate participatory and holistic approaches.

Regarding EU contribution, maintain long-term support to R&I in partner countries to contribute to the Global Gateway strategy, especially with investments in productive, sustainable and inclusive agrifood supply chains. Ensure a better articulation between the different EU mechanisms and funding to support innovation from knowledge production to prototyping, incubation and impact at scale.

Figure 2. Contributions of DeSIRA projects to agricultural innovation system (AIS) strengthening*



*Toillier A., Guillonnet R., Mathé S, Henriquez, P., Ramirez R., Triomphe B., Roefs M., Lecomte C., Dolinska O., Douthwaite B., Navas J. and Lima de Faria M. (2025), Proving and improving R&I impacts in agrifood systems through project-based approaches. Actionable learning from DeSIRA, CIRAD, Montpellier.