



Task Forces: A Successful Mode of Operation with National Partners

THE WARDA Task Forces started in 1991 as a novel approach to building partnerships with the national agricultural research programs of West Africa. In eight years, they have come a long way, and the Task Force approach is being adopted by the unified CORAF/WARDA rice research and development network for West and Central Africa. What have we learnt and where are we going?

The background: early relationships between international centers and their national partners

Conducting agricultural research and development for a region as large and diverse as West Africa is no easy task. Before the inception of the Task Force mechanism, two working groups of national agricultural research representatives were convened to advise WARDA on the development of a suitable framework. These groups identified four crucial issues which had to be addressed in order to ensure the success of any new relationship between an international agricultural research center (IARC) and its national partners (NARS).

First, earlier models had failed to incorporate the needs of NARS when setting priorities for the operation of the IARCs. Research agendas were set by the centers, and interested NARS were encouraged to collaborate. This 'top-down' approach also characterized most of the early IARC-established networks.

Second, international centers often failed to build on the diversity of their partner NARS, either by treating them all as if they were the same, or by working only with those which were stronger or larger. Furthermore, IARC-

NARS collaboration was often on a short-term project basis, rather than on an ongoing program basis. Such activities were poorly integrated with the IARC's core program, and the timeframe was often too short to generate any meaningful results. Short-term projects could also be disruptive of NARS' own programs and objectives.

Research results are made available beyond national borders through joint research and research coordination



Finally, IARCs all too often operated with NARS in a bilateral mode: working independently with each NARS.

On the basis of these diagnoses of earlier relationships between IARCs and NARS, the working groups strongly recommended that a mechanism be established to enable research planning on a regional level.

The response: what the Task Forces sought to achieve

In response to these criticisms and suggestions, WARDA set about to institute a research collaboration mechanism to meet the needs and aspirations of its partner NARS—that is, to address the NARS' needs in a 'bottom up' approach, rather than dictating the research agenda 'top down.' For this purpose, the Task Forces have four primary objectives.

Iron toxicity is a serious problem in many West African countries—originally handled by the Problem Soils Task Force, it is now within the remit of the Natural Resources Management Task Force

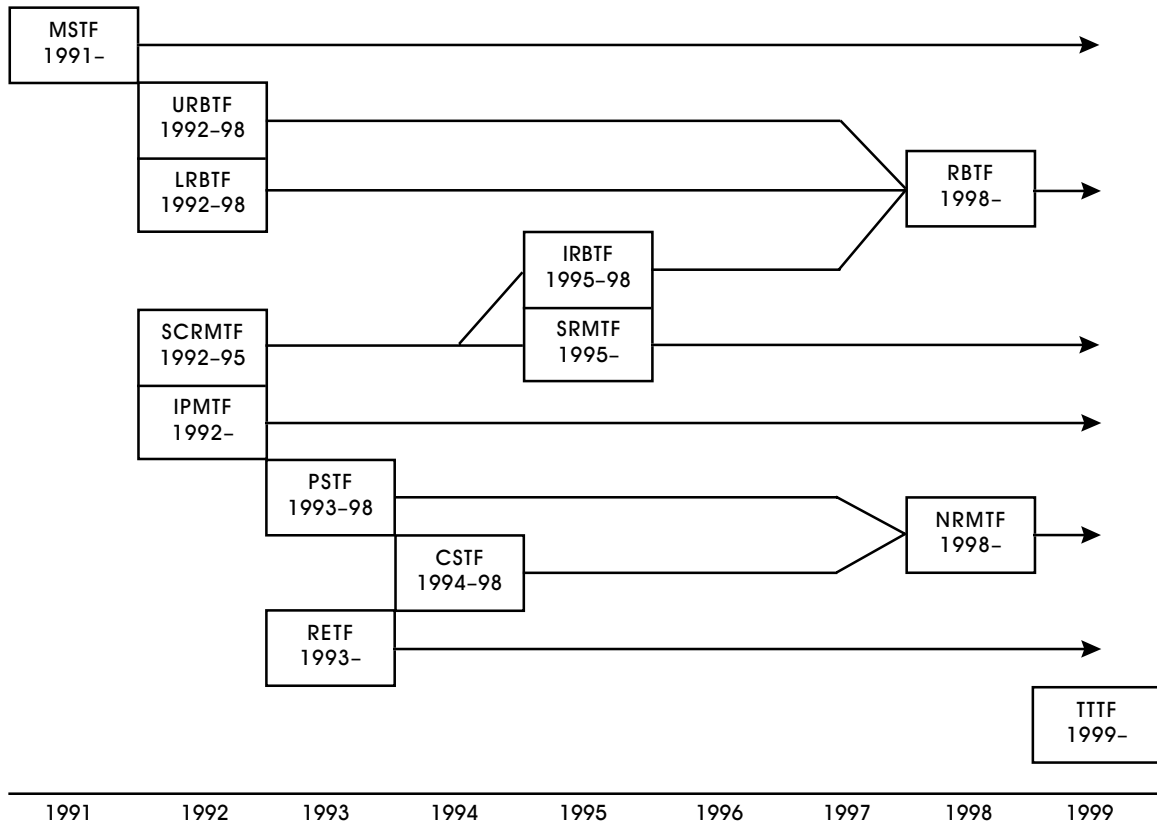


- To coordinate regional research activities, thereby reducing duplication and identifying the most efficient utilization of resources among the various rice research programs in West Africa.
- To provide national scientists with more complete and rapid access to research information and results of regional research.
- To transfer and test technologies in a targeted and systematic way.
- To target technical, material and financial assistance to national programs in a way that strengthens the overall regional rice research system.

Task Force activities are designed to address the major constraints to rice production as identified by the NARS. Regional coordination allows the work conducted in one country to be available for application in all the other countries. This negates the need for each country to conduct the same research, thus freeing resources elsewhere for other activities. The resources of individual NARS are not overstretched, but specific tasks are allocated to each country for the benefit of the region as a whole.

During the first phase of the Task Force mechanism, nine Task Forces were in operation (see Figure 1). Membership of a particular Task Force is open to any country in which the target ecosystem or research focus is important for rice production, and which has at least one scientist active in that area of research. The national participants are nominated by their NARS directors. The Task Forces are designed to operate with a minimum of administration and bureaucracy. Each Task Force has a Steering Committee, which is chaired by one of the national scientist members, and a WARDA scientist acts as secretary and provides coordination to the Task Force as a whole.

Figure 1. Evolution of the WARDA Task Forces



Task Forces (TF) acronyms: CS = Cropping Systems; IPM = Integrated Pest Management; IRB = Irrigated Rice Breeding; LRB = Lowland Rice Breeding; MS = Mangrove Swamp; NRM = Natural Resource Management; PS = Problem Soils; RB = Rice Breeding; RE = Rice Economics; SCRM = Sahel Crop and Resource Management; SRM = Sahel Resource Management; TT = Technology Transfer; URB = Upland Rice Breeding.

Modi operandi: coordinating regional rice research and capacity building

The Task Forces act as coordination units for WARDA and NARS research focused on regional issues. As such they essentially operate in five ways: meetings; joint research activities; monitoring tours; visiting fellowships; and training.

The members of each Task Force meet once a year to present and discuss their results from the previous year, and to plan activities for the following year. For many Task

Joint research activities are a major component of the Task Force mechanism



Force members, these meetings are at the heart of the Task Force mechanism. It is here that researchers from the various NARS and WARDA meet together to plan their research activities as a joint exercise. Scientists that for most of their careers and most of each year work in isolation, are brought together with their peers—the meetings allow exchange of experiences and information among partners who might otherwise never meet each other. Mohamed Kebbeh, Head of Socio-economic Research at the National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI), The Gambia, and member of the Economics Task Force since 1997, is a strong supporter of the Task Force for this very reason: “Researchers from the same discipline, but from different countries, are brought together by the Task Force for interaction that otherwise would not have occurred. This is highly beneficial as we learn a lot from our interactions with NARS that are stronger in specific areas.”

Proposals for projects submitted to the annual meeting need the prior approval of the director of the executing NARS institution. Resources are allocated to projects selectively (there are usually more proposals than funds available) by the Task Force’s Steering Committee, based on the priorities for research identified in the consultation process. Here, again, the Task Force provides strength in the form of research collaboration. “Proposals which require strengthening,” explains James Edwin of Rice Research, Rokupr, Sierra Leone, and Chairman of the

Economics Task Force since its inception in 1993, “are discussed by Task Force members from various countries. Strengthening of the proposal [improving its chances of being funded] is provided by the inclusion of collaborative activities across two or more countries.”

Monitoring Tours are conducted to specific ecosystems in selected countries. For these tours, Task Force members and WARDA scientists constitute a multidisciplinary team, which seeks to verify that the Task Force research priorities are still valid. Essentially this amounts to verifying the importance of existing target constraints and identifying any new issues requiring research input. The tours include visits to Task Force trials and discussions with farmers to understand their perception of the constraints to rice production and to identify opportunities for technology generation, adaptation and transfer. Dakoua Dona, Entomologist and Rice Program Leader in Burkina Faso, and member of the Integrated Pest Management Task Force since 1995, finds monitoring tours particularly useful: “we see real problems in the field and, even more valuable, indigenous techniques in operation. I particularly remember the first time I saw rice growing on ridges—that was in Guinea Bissau.”

A major part of Task Force activities involves training—increasing the knowledge and skills of the NARS researchers in particular. One aspect of this is the Visiting Fellowship program, whereby a NARS scientist goes for individual one-on-one training either to WARDA or to another NARS. This facility is useful where the trainee needs, for example, to learn a particular methodology or the use of a certain piece of equipment, or for data analysis and report writing. Typically, Visiting Fellowships are for one week to three months in duration.

More typical training programs are also run by, or for, the Task Forces. Here, the members of a Task Force, or a selection of members from a Task Force, attend a training course to learn a new skill. By the end of 1997, some 526 scientists had attended such training courses. Task Force members particularly appreciate the availabil-



During monitoring tours, NARS and WARDA scientists discuss crop problems with farmers in the field

Variations on a theme

Despite their unification under one set of objectives and *modi operandi*, the Task Forces have a certain amount of individuality—each drawing together scientists in similar fields to approach rice research with a regional perspective. The emphases and exact operations of the various groups differ so as to make each individual Task Force very much a 'variation on the Task Force theme.' Here are just a few examples.

The Mangrove Swamp Rice Task Force is unique in that it is not coordinated by WARDA, but by the Mangrove Research Station in Rokupr, Sierra Leone. This came about when WARDA management, at the behest of various donors, decided that Mangrove Swamp should no longer be a core ecosystem for WARDA. Most of WARDA's mangrove swamp work had been based at the Rokupr station, and the Sierra Leonian NARS was perfectly poised to take over the station, the research program and the Task Force. Emmanuel Imolehin, Assistant Director of the National Cereals Research Institute (NCRI), Badeggi, Nigeria, and member of the Mangrove Swamp Rice Task Force since its inception in 1991, highlighted the value of the small-grant system "for those NARS whose governments do not give priority to mangrove swamp research." Imolehin also highlights other major benefits of the Task Force: "The exchange of rice germplasm has been invaluable, with Rokupr generating good source material, reducing the need for breeding work in other NARS. The Visiting Fellowship system has also benefitted our Task Force, for example, a group of us went to the NARS in Senegal to learn how to conduct soil analysis."

For Mamadou Kabirou Ndiaye of the Institut d'économie rural, Mali, and member of the Sahel Resource Management Task Force since 1994 and Interim Chairman since 1997, the highlight has been the knowledge gained from the interaction with Sahel-based rice researchers across the region. "At a meeting of the Unité de recherche pour le développement observatoire de changement (URDOC) (a French project based in the Office du Niger rice-growing area), the producers stressed that they were having problems with threshing their produce. Because I was a member of the Task Force, I knew about the thresher-cleaner that had been developed in Senegal, so I was able to contact WARDA for assistance. We now have a prototype under testing in Mali."

The Integrated Pest Management Task Force is a multidisciplinary group of entomologists, pathologists, virologists, weed scientists and nematologists that meets together rather than in discipline-oriented groups. Their aim is to generate technologies to form integrated pest management options suitable for promotion among farmers. Where diversity within pest populations is a key issue, pests (blast, rice yellow mottle virus and African rice gall midge) are tackled through coordinated experiments on a region-wide basis. For other pests, such as weeds and nematodes, responsibility for research is taken by individual NARS and the results shared throughout the region. These efforts have led to a great improvement in the knowledge that is available to the regional rice researchers, and is now forming the basis of integrated pest management approaches.

Dogbé Selome of the Centre de recherche agricole of the Institut togolais de recherche agricole (CRA/ITRA, Togo), and member of the Breeding Task Force since the inception of the Lowland and Upland Breeding Task Forces in 1992, tells that members of the Breeding Task Force particularly benefit from the distribution of new plant material in nurseries—material originating both in WARDA and in the various NARS. He also stresses the importance of other aspects of the mechanism: "in Togo, there is insufficient funding for national scientists to conduct research; the small grants provided through the Task Force at least enable us to do something! We have also benefitted in our work by learning tissue-culture techniques from WARDA, again through the Task Force."

Through the Breeding Task Force, WARDA was able to modify the composition of INGER nurseries to make them more specific and targeted to NARS needs. In the early days of the International Network for the Genetic Evaluation of Rice (INGER), a few nurseries were composed for wide distribution. These nurseries had fixed composition in terms of entries, although they were a 'mixed bag' of plant types. These were sent complete to all participating countries, regardless of their capabilities to handle the number of entries provided. Through the Breeding Task Forces, INGER-Africa asked the various NARS what they wanted in terms of plant types (duration, grain type, stature, stress resistances and tolerances) and number of entries. In this way, they were able to target the specific needs of the individual countries, by supplying germplasm which had the required characteristics. To date, many varieties promoted through the Task Force/ INGER nurseries have been released in various countries within the sub-region (see Table 1).



Blast is a major rice disease throughout the sub-region and therefore a focus of regional Task Force activities. Here is a Task Force screening trial for blast resistance—the variety in the foreground is clearly not resistant!

Table 1. Rice varieties released by WARDA member states, most were promoted through the Task Force mechanism

Variety	Traits	Country(ies)
Upland rice		
TOX 1011-4-A2	DT, BR	Guinea
WAB 35-2 FX	HYP, BR, DT	Nigeria
WAB 56-39	E, BR, DT	Burkina Faso
WAB 56-50	E, BR, DT	Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Liberia
WAB 56-104	E, BR, DT	Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia
WAB 56-125	E, BR, DT	Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria
WAB 96-1-1	WS, LIA	Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone
WAB 99-1-1	BR, DR, AT	Côte d'Ivoire
WAB 384-B-B-1-2	HGY	Cameroon
WAB 638-1	A, HGY	Côte d'Ivoire
Lowland rice		
Cisadane (FARO 51)	GMT	Nigeria
WITA 1 (Yabra)	ITT, BR	Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria
WITA 3 (Kossou)	ITT	Côte d'Ivoire
WITA 4 (TOX 3100-44-1-2-3-3; TGR 203)	ITT, DT, LIA, HGY	Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria, Togo
WITA 7 (Gagnoa)	GQ	Côte d'Ivoire
WITA 8 (Sandela)	VT	Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria
WITA 9 (Nimba)	E, VR	Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger
Irrigated rice		
BW 293-2 (Sahel 201)	HGY	Mauritania, Senegal
IR 64 (FKR 42)	E, ST, HGY	Burkina Faso
IR 13240-108-2-2-3 (Sahel 108, FKR 44)	HGY, E	Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Senegal
IR 31785-58-1-2-3-3	HGY, E	Mauritania
ITA 306 (Sahel 202)	HGY, GQ	Mauritania, Senegal
S 499 B-28	HGY	Mauritania
WASSA (IR 32307-107-3-2-2)	E, GQ, HGY	Mali
Mangrove rice		
ROHYB 6	MD	Guinea Bissau
ROK 5	HGY, ST, AT	Guinea
WAR 1 (ROK 22)	HGY, ST, AT	The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Senegal, Sierra Leone
WAR 77-2-1-1	HGY, ST, AT	The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Senegal, Sierra Leone

A = aromatic; AT = acidity tolerance; BR = blast resistance; DR = drought resistance; E = earliness; GMT = gall midge tolerance; GQ = grain (eating) quality; HGY = high grain yield; HYP = high yield potential; ITT = iron-toxicity tolerance; LIA = low input adaptability; MD = medium duration; ST = salt tolerance; VR = virus (RYMV) resistance; VT = virus (RYMV) tolerance; WS = weed suppression.

ity of non-research training. A few years ago, many Task Force scientists attended a course run in collaboration with WARDA on writing research reports. The reaction of Segda Zacherie of the Institut de l'environnement et des recherches agricoles (INERA), Burkina Faso, and Chairman of the Natural Resource Management Task Force since 1996, is typical of many who have benefitted from this particular experience: "the training in scientific writing has been a major component, and the Task Force presentations have been of increasingly high quality since the courses started in 1994. My superiors are now amazed that I am able to publish a new research article on average every six months—most of these are co-written with WARDA scientists—this would not have been possible without the Task Forces. Other networks with which I have been involved only had money for research, not training."

The future: a single regional research rice network

In 1997, USAID reviewed all of the networks that it had been funding, including the WARDA/NARS Task Forces. The review highlighted strengths and weaknesses of the Task Force mechanism, and included identification of areas in which improvements could be made, or where the Task Forces were ready for a change of emphasis.

The First WARDA/NARS Experts Committee Meeting was held in January 1998, and included detailed discussion of the USAID review. Recommendations made by the USAID review and endorsed by the Experts Committee were for the Task Forces to include a new

focus on technology transfer, for the three breeding Task Forces to merge, and for the Cropping Systems and Problem Soils Task Forces to be combined into a single Natural Resource Management Task Force. The number and nature of meetings was also a target for reform—there were simply too many meetings! The Experts Committee also recommended that steps be taken to harmonize the Task Forces with the Conférence des responsables de la recherche agricole en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre (CORAF) Rice Network, especially since the composition of the WARDA National Experts Committee was almost identical to that of the CORAF Executive Committee and both networks involve the same NARS scientists.

CORAF and WARDA met to discuss harmonization of their activities in August 1998. This led to a proposal that the two networks be merged into a single rice research network for West Africa. At this meeting, CORAF and WARDA agreed on a 'Memorandum of Understanding,' declaring their intentions for future collaboration. A further CORAF/WARDA meeting in Cotonou (Benin) in December 1998 consolidated the commitment to the merger, and stated that the new network will be hosted by WARDA and should follow the Task Forces model. It is suggested that the new network comprise two bodies: a General Assembly and a Steering Committee. An Interim Steering Committee was established at the Cotonou meeting. It is expected that a permanent structure will be put in place early in 2000 at the First Regional Rice Research Review—that is, the first full meeting of the new network.