

# Accompanying research in the development sector

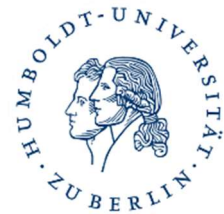
## Communication and cooperation processes

**A case study from Madagascar**

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Alexandra Konzack & Jonathan Steinke

Humboldt University Berlin



# Accompanying research in the development sector

## Communication and cooperation processes

### Key messages

- This study takes stock of cooperation and communication between the diverse stakeholders of an accompanying research (AR) project, two years after joining a GIZ development project in Madagascar.
- Many relevant stakeholders are not well aware about the AR project, its objectives, its activities, and its potential benefits for their own work.
- Two central stakeholders at GIZ in Madagascar are key 'information bridges' within the AR network. Direct exchange between other stakeholders (i.e., project implementing NGOs, researchers) does not happen sufficiently to keep everyone informed about others' recent, ongoing, and upcoming activities.
- AR activities are not well integrated in the overall GIZ project structure, causing confusion among many project stakeholders about what rights, responsibilities, and obligations they have towards the research team. Clear governance and assignment of roles and reporting duties are recommended.
- Most stakeholders appreciated oral, in-person presentation of research outputs. More frequent in-person meetings among all stakeholders are needed for efficient AR cooperation.

### Abbreviations used:

AR.....	Accompanying research
Accord-M...	Accompanying Research for nutrition-sensitive Development in Madagascar
GIZ.....	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
HU.....	Humboldt University Berlin
OAB.....	Operational Advisory Board
ProSAR.....	Project for food security, nutrition, and enhancement of resilience
SNA.....	Social Network Analysis
UA.....	University of Antananarivo

## I. Introduction

Accompanying research (AR) projects have been implemented in diverse contexts, aiming to assess and improve the outcomes of social, business, or research processes with an outside perspective. The wide scope in use of AR, however, has led to unclarity in what defines AR and what an AR project can be expected to accomplish (Defila & Di Giulio, 2016; Weith et al., 2019).

Besides conducting research on ongoing processes over an extensive period, accompanying research projects require skills in non-research activities, such as networking with other stakeholders of the researched process or dissemination and evaluation of research findings (Fiedeler et al., 2010; Weith et al., 2019). These networking and outreach activities are key for effective AR, but also to achieve adjustments or improvements in the process that is being researched.

At the same time, the communication needs of AR generate workload for all stakeholders involved. This time burden creates the risk of stakeholders (policy makers, entrepreneurs, development practitioners, etc.) being overburdened and therefore less open for engaging with researchers. Although it is well-established that effective communication structures are crucial for the success of AR projects, so far there has been little research emphasis on the ‘how’ of communication in AR projects (Funk et al., 2018; Weith et al., 2019).

Clearly, there can be no blueprint for effective communication and stakeholder cooperation within AR projects. However, to draw lessons with potentially broader usefulness, we conducted a case study on barriers and opportunities for communication and cooperation within an AR project in Madagascar. Both the AR project (‘Accord-M’<sup>1</sup>) and the accompanied development project (‘ProSAR’<sup>2</sup>) had been implemented for roughly two years at the time of our study. On the basis of a social network analysis, key informant interviews, and participant observation, we aim at describing and reflecting both challenges and promising cooperation processes established within the AR network.

We intended to answer four questions:

1. What communication processes have established after two years of cooperation?
2. To what degrees do different topics dominate the communication?
3. What main challenges do stakeholders perceive after two years of cooperation?
4. How could communication and cooperation processes be improved?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Case study context

We investigated the case of an AR project jointly implemented by Humboldt University of Berlin (HU), University of Antananarivo, Madagascar (UA), and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). The research project (‘Accord-M’) supports a development project (‘ProSAR’) managed by GIZ in the Atsimo Atsinanana region of southeastern Madagascar. ProSAR aims at increasing the food and nutrition security of 15,000 households in Atsimo Atsinanana, focusing on multiple indicators of diet quality and health of women and children below the age of two years. Interventions are carried out by three non-

<sup>1</sup> Accompanying Research for nutrition-sensitive Development in Madagascar

<sup>2</sup> Projet de Sécurité Alimentaire, nutrition et renforcement de la Résilience (*Project for food security, nutrition, and enhancement of resilience*)

governmental organizations (NGOs), GSDM (a local organization), InterAide (a France-based NGO) and Welthungerhilfe (a German NGO). These three partner organizations are trained by GIZ on locally relevant topics, including nutrition-sensitive agriculture, nutrition, hygiene, and childcare. The organizations then pass on the knowledge to the beneficiaries following a multi-stage ‘cascade’ model that involves village promoters and ‘mother leaders’, a concept similar to the more widespread ‘lead farmer’ concept (Ragasa, 2020).

Starting at the same time as the GIZ development project (March 2020) and still ongoing at the time of writing this piece, an interdisciplinary research team from HU and UA has been collaborating with ProSAR. This team consists of two PhD students at UA, two research coordinators at HU (the authors of this document), and multiple graduate students from both universities. Accord-M, the AR project, was co-designed by HU and the global GIZ ‘coordination unit’ in Bonn, who oversee food and nutrition security-oriented activities in a range of countries. While some major research topics had been pre-set, the project design also maintained flexibility for emerging research needs defined by ProSAR.

In broad terms, Accord-M recurrently collects and analyses quantitative and (predominantly) qualitative data to approach diverse questions that the practitioners of ProSAR (GIZ and NGOs) encounter in project planning and implementation. Accord-M focuses on agriculture- and nutrition-related aspects of ProSAR, and emphasizes socio-economic questions, e.g., around farmer perceptions, or the practical feasibility of certain intervention options. The research team aims at creating actionable information products that serve the needs of GIZ and NGO development practitioners, such as short reports, presentations, or policy briefs, as well as giving general recommendations to the global coordination unit at GIZ in Germany. The proclaimed goal of Accord-M is to support ProSAR in using resources more efficiently, for stronger impacts on their beneficiaries’ food and nutrition security situation.

Figure 1 shows a diagram of the major stakeholders involved in the AR project, distributed across five major stakeholder groups:

- GIZ Bonn: global coordination unit, based in the city of Bonn
- GIZ ProSAR: project leadership, based in Antananarivo (capital of Madagascar), and local project staff, based in Farafangana (capital of Atsimo Atsinanana region)
- NGOs: the three implementation partners
- Accord-M *per se*: PhD researchers, graduate students, and research coordinators at UA and HU
- Two academic advisors. One advisor from UA supervises the PhD thesis progress and supports coordination with UA. The other expert is a development nutritionist from University of Gießen, Germany, who provides external scientific feedback on research plans and preliminary outputs on a regular basis.

The project is governed by an ‘Operational Advisory Board’ (OAB), which includes a subset of stakeholders and meets three times a year to jointly take major decisions on research foci (see Figure 1).

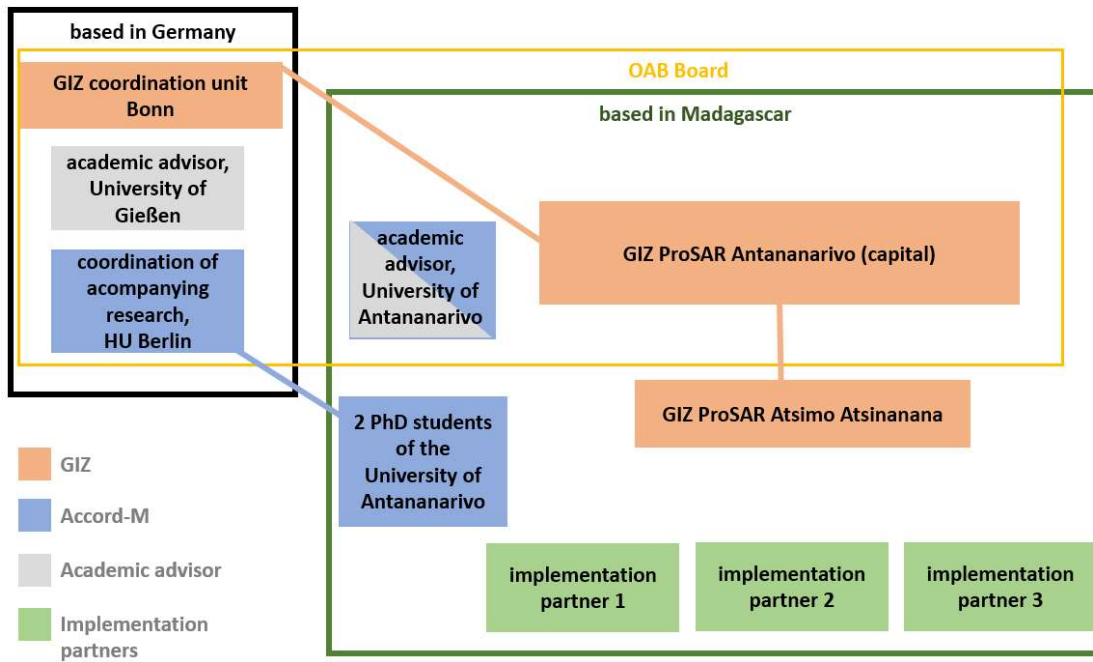


Figure 1: Cooperating Units of the Accompanying Research Cooperation

## 2.2 Social network analysis

### 2.2.1 Data collection

To derive recommendations for improved efficiency of communication within the AR project network, we used a social network analysis (SNA) to take stock of the interactions between all key stakeholders after two years of cooperation. SNA can help understand the structure of relationships between social entities, which can help increase the practical usefulness of a network (Agneessens & Labianca, 2022; Butts, 2008; Neugebauer & Beywl, 2006).

In April 2022, we carried out an online stakeholder survey, using the *LimeSurvey* software (<https://www.limesurvey.org>). To reconstruct the core social network involved in the AR cooperation, we identified 21 individuals from the five stakeholder groups described in Section 2.1. The boundaries of the SNA were predefined by the researcher performing the SNA (first author of this document) by using own knowledge and interviewing members of ProSAR for the nomination of stakeholders. Thoughtful definition of boundaries matters, since boundaries determine the number and quality of observed links between individuals, and thus can influence the outcomes of SNA (Brass, 2012).

Nineteen stakeholders responded the survey. Each respondent described their communicative and work relation to all other 20 stakeholders involved, so information on the communication of all 21 individuals could be collected despite the abstention of two stakeholders. The survey used the concept of own-tie-reporting, whereby each respondent assessed the intensity of their mutual relation to all other stakeholders by using a roster (Butts, 2008). This involved the following elements:

- Perceived intensity of the professional relation to each of the other 20 individuals: five answer options ranging from “I have not yet talked to this person” to “we are in very close collaboration”
- Perceived frequency of communication with each of the other 20 individuals: five answer options ranging from “never” to “rather daily”

- Main topics of communication with each of the other 20 individuals: between zero and five topics could be selected, including: “administrative issues”, “monitoring & evaluation”, “publications, reports and presentations”, “research planning” and “ProSAR interventions”. These topics were selected according to an explorative analysis of emails exchanged in 2021 between members of ProSAR and Accord-M.

In addition, respondents were asked to share any further comments and ideas on the topics raised during the survey.

### 2.2.2 Data analysis

Survey data were analysed regarding the following aspects:

*Overall network.* For each stakeholder, the number of links to others was calculated (this is called ‘degree’). The average degree as well as the network density were calculated to evaluate how strongly connected the network is, compared to its hypothetical connection potential (Butts, 2008; Hirschfeld et al., 2012). Topic-specific networks were constructed to inspect how communication within the AR stakeholder network differs between the five principal topics of communication (see previous Section).

*Local structures.* Two different metrics were used to characterize the roles of individual stakeholders (Goldbeck, 2013; 2015):

- *Degree centrality* counts the stakeholder’s number of connections. It may range from 0 to 20 in our case.
- *Betweenness centrality* measures the extent to which a person's role enables information to flow from one part of the network to another. It is defined as the share of shortest paths between other stakeholders than pass through that specific stakeholder, and is a percentage value (0 to 100 %). Higher betweenness centrality indicates a greater ‘bridging’ function within the network.

All network illustrations were generated using *Gephi* software (Bastian et al., 2009), employing the force-based algorithm *Force Atlas*.

## 2.3 Semi-structured interviews

SNA can offer a profound overview on existing relations and communication structures, but offers limited opportunities to understand the ‘why (not)’ of social interactions. To enable interpretation of the network data, eight semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held in in June and July 2022, in either French or German language. Interviewees from the following stakeholder groups were interviewed:

- GIZ ProSAR: 2 interviewees
- NGOs: 3 interviewees
- Accord-M: 2 interviewees
- Academic advisor: 1 interviewee

At least one person per stakeholder group was selected for an interview, except for the global coordination unit at GIZ in Germany, where stakeholders were unable for interviews. For Accord-M, one interviewee is an author of this document. Within each stakeholder group, interviewees were selected according to their degree and availability.

During the interviews, the SNA results on connection intensity, communication frequency, and main communication topics were presented to the interviewees using the network illustrations created with *Gephi*. Interviewees were then asked for their personal thoughts and opinions about these networks, for example, whether these results surprised them and how they interpreted the networks. Subsequently, the interview addressed the interviewee's individual role within their organisation and the wider AR cooperation, perceived challenges and opportunities for the cooperation, and ideas for improvement of the AR cooperation and communication.

The analysis of themes followed a hybrid approach, with a deductive *a priori* set of codes, given by the guideline, as well as inductive identification of new codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Software *MaxQDA* (VERBI Software, 2021) was used for coding interview transcripts.

## 2.4 Participant observation

In June 2022, Accord-M organized a results dissemination workshop. The two PhD students presented and discussed findings from five research studies with staff from NGOs and GIZ ProSAR. Since this event brought members of Accord-M, GIZ ProSAR, and all three NGOs to one place, it was used as object for observation of communication among stakeholders. Since the authors joined the workshop as members of the Accord-M team, the observation was participant. We observed the types and intensity of interactions and discussions between stakeholders. Observations were noted in an unstructured manner, and notes were taken both during and immediately after the event (Kochinka, 2010). This observation of interactions helped interpret and discuss the insights and impressions gathered by the SNA and interviews.

## 2.5 Limitations of the case study setting

The authors of this document were part of the AR cooperation as a research coordinator. This brought advantages for the study design, for example, in allowing us to set the boundaries for the SNA more easily, and developing the interview guideline with pre-existing knowledge of the AR project. At the same time, this fact may have increased the risk of acquiescence bias (Blair et al., 2020). Due to prior (and future) collaboration, a sense of personal obligation towards the researcher can lead to overly positive responses. The risk of bias was mitigated by triangulating different research methods, i.e., combining an online survey, individual interviews, and observations (Hirschfeld et al., 2012).

As the survey respondents and interviewees had heterogeneous types of engagement with the AR project, the development of our survey as well as the interview guideline faced trade-offs: the survey needed to be informative, but short enough to ensure all respondents answered all questions despite tight work schedules, and the interviews needed to allow comparability between interviewees by standardizing the questionnaire. These compromises may have led to omitting of some issues perceived as relevant by some stakeholders.

# 3. Results

## 3.1 Cooperation and communication between AR stakeholders

### 3.1.1 Professional relations

To understand the cooperation and communication structures that have developed, we plotted different social networks showing the relations between 21 stakeholders of the AR project. Figure 2 shows the overall

intensity of mutual connections between stakeholders, classified in five different relational categories (illustrated by the strength of lines that connect stakeholders). The network is not very dense, with only 57 % of all possible bilateral ties actually established. Very close collaboration exists within each stakeholder groups (i.e., between nodes of the same colour in Figure 2). Strong external ties are found between the NGOs and GIZ ProSAR. Some strong connections exist between selected, key stakeholders from different organizational groups. For example, stakeholder 6 and 16 (GIZ Bonn) link strongly with stakeholders 1 and 2 (GIZ ProSAR). Stakeholders 8 and 9 (Accord-M) link strongly with stakeholder 4 (GIZ ProSAR), and stakeholder 12 (Accord-M) with stakeholders 6 and 18 (GIZ Bonn). Rather weak, or no connections at all were generally observed between the following organizational groups:

- Accord-M and NGOs
- Academic advisors and NGOs
- GIZ Bonn and NGOs

Figure 2 and Table 1 show that the numbers of reported links vary considerably between the stakeholders. This suggests varying levels of involvement in the AR cooperation. While the average number of links per network stakeholder is 11.3, stakeholders 1 and 2 (GIZ ProSAR) clearly stand out regarding their levels of interconnectedness (Table 1).

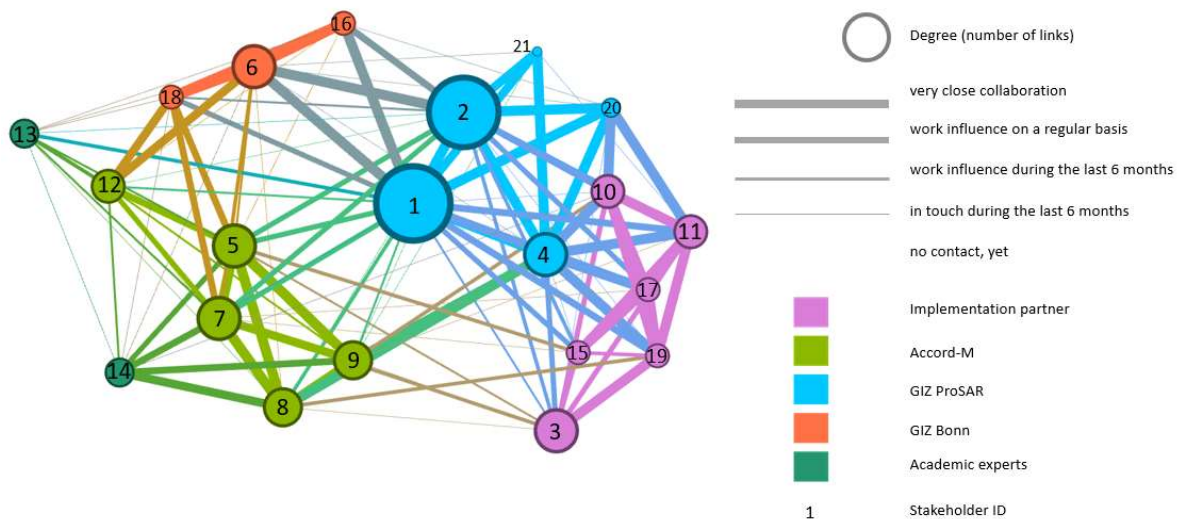


Figure 2: Relational network of AR stakeholders, weighed relations, own illustration via Gephi



Table 1: Degree and centrality of AR stakeholders. Stakeholders are ranked by the number of links.

Stakeholder	Organization	Number of links	Betweenness Centrality
1	GIZ ProSAR	20	22.21
2	GIZ ProSAR	19	19.57
3	NGO	13	4.11
4	GIZ ProSAR	13	4.99
5	Accord-M	13	4.45
6	GIZ Bonn	13	6.42
7	Accord-M	13	5.23
8	Accord-M	12	3.71
9	Accord-M	12	4.74
10	NGO	11	2.62
11	NGO	11	1.37
12	Accord-M	10	2.59
13	Academic advisor	10	0.70
14	Academic advisor	10	2.17
15	NGO	9	1.20
16	GIZ Bonn	9	0.77
17	NGO	9	0.40
18	GIZ Bonn	9	0.76
19	NGO	8	0.95
20	GIZ ProSAR	8	1.71
21	GIZ ProSAR	6	0.31
Average		11.33	4.33

Given their high levels of betweenness centrality, stakeholders 1 and 2 act as important bridges between other stakeholders and groups. In addition, five other stakeholders have above-average betweenness centrality, suggesting they may act as information bridges within the AR cooperation: stakeholders 4 (GIZ ProSAR), 5, 7, 9 (Accord-M), and 6 (GIZ Bonn).

### 3.1.2 Communication frequency

Figure 3 shows the reported frequency of mutual communication between all stakeholders. Communication processes appear to be clustered, with frequent communication (daily or weekly) within organizational units, and less frequent external communication. The NGOs are the most isolated organizational group, with no strong communication (at least 'rather weekly') to any other group. Strong inter-organizational communication flows, however, are observed between the following groups:

- Between Accord-M and GIZ ProSAR, two dominant lines of communication are observed:
  - Stakeholders 8 and 9 (Accord-M) with stakeholder 4 (GIZ ProSAR)
  - Stakeholder 7 (Accord-M) with stakeholder 2 (GIZ ProSAR)

- GIZ Bonn (stakeholder 6) and GIZ ProSAR (stakeholders 1 and 2)
- An academic advisor (stakeholder 14) and Accord-M (stakeholder 9)

Generally speaking, the NGOs communicate on a rather monthly base with GIZ ProSAR. There is also roughly monthly exchange between one stakeholder from an implementation partner (stakeholder 3) and Accord-M (stakeholders 5 and 7). Rather monthly exchange also takes place between GIZ Bonn (stakeholder 6 and 18) and Accord-M (stakeholder 5, 7, and 12).

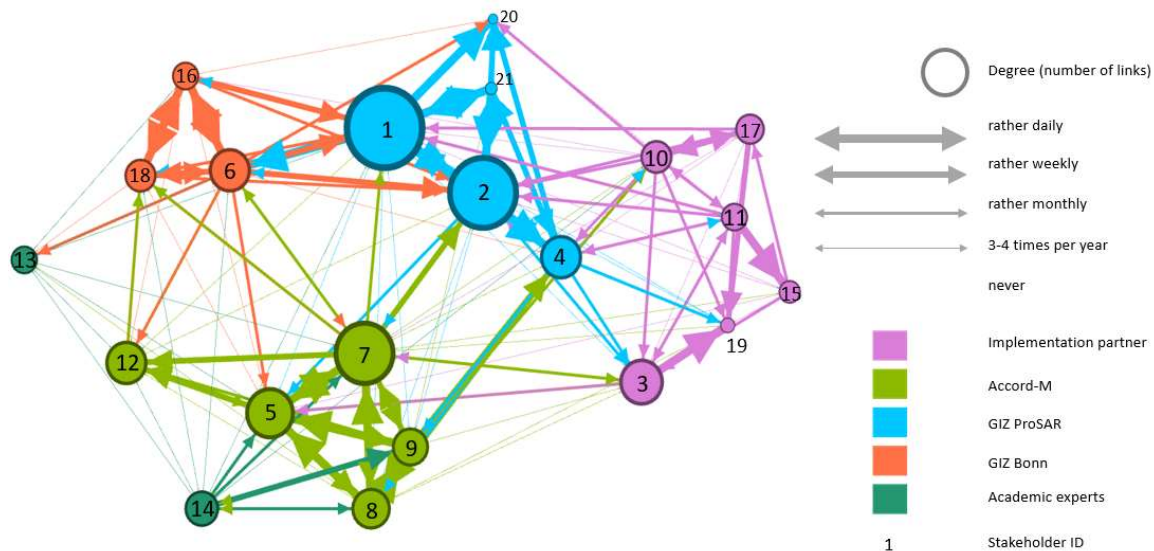


Figure 3: Network on communication frequency between AR Stakeholders, own illustration via Gephi

Figure 3 shows that mutual communication frequency is often perceived differently by the two stakeholders involved, illustrated by different-sized arrowheads within one link. This can be caused by different understandings of communication itself or the difference between incoming and outgoing communication (e.g., sending of an email vs. responding to it).

As was the case for the general relations, stakeholders 1 and 2 (GIZ ProSAR) show the strongest interlinkages overall. They have high degree centrality and perform as important bridges (high betweenness centrality), but also stakeholders 4 (GIZ ProSAR), 5 (Accord-M), and 7 (Accord-M) have relatively high betweenness centrality.

Table 2: Selected degree and Centrality Measures of the Communication Network in Figure 3

Stakeholder	Organization	Incoming links	Outgoing links	Total number of links	Betweenness centrality
1	GIZ ProSAR	18	19	37	56.69
2	GIZ ProSAR	16	17	33	38.67
3	NGO	11	11	22	7.18
4	GIZ ProSAR	11	10	21	9.24
5	Accord-M	13	11	24	8.64
6	GIZ Bonn	9	12	21	7.17
7	Accord-M	13	16	29	21.33
8	Accord-M	9	11	20	4.82
9	Accord-M	8	11	19	4.28
10	NGO	8	9	17	5.46
11	NGO	6	9	15	1.18
12	Accord-M	10	11	21	4.39
13	Academic advisor	9	6	15	1.01
14	Academic advisor	8	10	18	2.75
15	NGO	6	7	13	0.65
16	GIZ Bonn	7	8	15	3.35
17	NGO	7	9	16	1.64
18	GIZ Bonn	8	9	17	1.34
19	NGO	10	0	10	0
20	GIZ ProSAR	5	4	9	0.2
21	GIZ ProSAR	8	0	8	0

### 3.1.3 Topic-specific communication

Figure 4 presents communication networks on four selected topics. The sub-figures show that depending on the topic, different stakeholders are central or act as bridges. In general, the thematic networks are rather loose, suggesting that topic-specific communication tends to happen between few, selected stakeholders.

Administrative issues (Fig. 4A): Stakeholder 1 (GIZ ProSAR) is the central person (betweenness centrality 128.73) and discusses administration with almost all other stakeholders, except the academic advisors.

Monitoring & Evaluation (Fig. 4B): Stakeholder 2 (GIZ ProSAR) is the central person (betweenness centrality 100.68). Other stakeholders strongly involved in the communication on M&E include stakeholders 5 and 7 (Accord-M), stakeholder 3 (NGO), stakeholder 18 (GIZ Bonn), and stakeholders 1 and 4 (GIZ ProSAR).

Publications, Reports and Presentations (Fig. 4C): This communication network shows clusters, especially for the stakeholders of Accord-M. All Accord-M stakeholders have high degree centrality, suggesting frequent exchange on the topic among Accord-M stakeholders. The academic advisors and GIZ Bonn are involved in the publication discussions of Accord-M. The NGOs communicate among themselves on the matter, as well as with some stakeholders of ProSAR. There is almost no exchange on publications, reports and presentations between NGOs and Accord-M.

Research Planning (Fig. 4D): The network on research planning differs from the other thematic networks: neither clear clusters nor central stakeholders become visible, and compared to the other topics, communication takes place rather inter-organizational. Accord-M is rather central, along with the academic advisors and stakeholder 1 from ProSAR. The Accord-M team seems somewhat divided: part of the team (the research coordinators) communicates rather towards GIZ Bonn, and regularly with one implementation partner (NGO). The other part of Accord-M (PhD students) communicates more strongly with one stakeholder from GIZ ProSAR and one NGO, but not with GIZ Bonn. Finally, most NGO stakeholders and some stakeholders of GIZ ProSAR do not discuss research planning with Accord-M.

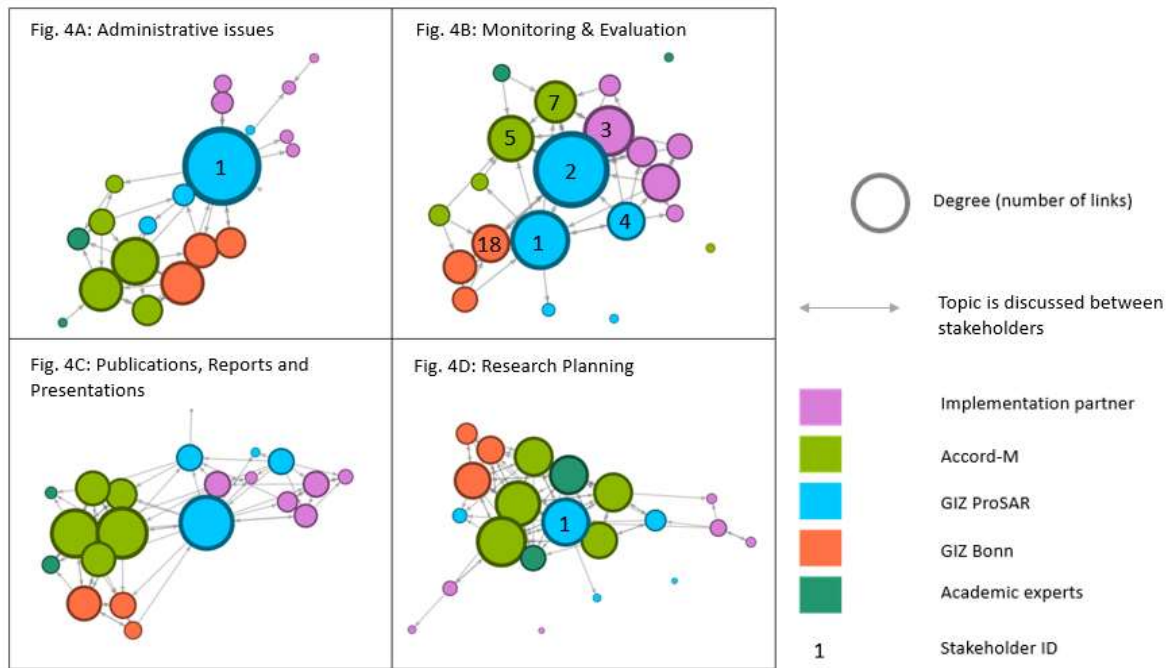


Figure 4: Thematic networks on four central communication issues, links are directed, own illustration via Gephi.

## 3.2 Interviews

### 3.2.1 Stakeholder reflections on the social network analysis

At the beginning of all interviews, the SNA results were presented. All eight interviewees agreed the network figures generally represented the current cooperation reality well. They generally confirmed that GIZ ProSAR is in a central position and in charge of the exchange of information, i.e., acting as information bridge. Furthermore, interviewees confirmed that there is no communication between GIZ Bonn and the NGOs, and only limited exchange between Accord-M and NGOs. Some interviewees expressed surprise at seeing that not all NGOs seemed strongly linked to GIZ ProSAR and wondered how a change of staff would change the network. Although some interviewees suggested that certain persons affiliated with GIZ ProSAR or the NGOs were missing in the SNA, they believed that including these individuals would not have affected the main results. The thematic network on research planning was perceived as especially interesting by different interviewees, since it suggests strong collaboration between the organizational entities.

### 3.2.2 A deeper look at communication processes

The interviews provided a qualitative understanding of different lines of communication that had been highlighted by the SNA. For example, stakeholders of Accord-M had exchanged with the NGOs. But these exchanges were mainly based on mail contact, and often unilateral, i.e., emails remained unanswered. Implementation partners, on the other hand, had sent information to Accord-M researchers, for example, about the project area or implementation design. Research results, however, were then fed back to the partners only via ProSAR, or uploaded in a shared folder in MS Teams, where they would go unnoticed. One interviewee stated: *“I gave information to the Accord-M researchers, without knowing what they do with it.”* Still, NGO stakeholders do not consider the communication with Accord-M as time consuming, since the exchange was limited to a few events.

This mutual perception of unmet communication needs between Accord-M and NGOs is striking, as Accord-M stakeholders consider the communication with the NGO partners as most important. One strong link had been established between one NGO and Accord-M, which was perceived by both sides as very helpful and mutually beneficial. Academic advice provided by Accord-M was used to design the M&E design of the NGO. In turn, the NGO supported the design and execution of Accord-M research studies.

Multiple interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the intensity of communication to certain other stakeholders. Communication between the academic advisors and the Accord-M team was perceived as not frequent enough in the beginning of the project. Also, the weak connection between the Malagasy academic advisor and GIZ ProSAR was confirmed and attributed to communication barriers. Although the advisor and GIZ ProSAR do communicate, exchange is generally restricted to e-mails or joint attendance of events, without substantial discussions taking place. Accord-M perceived the communication with NGOs as well as GIZ ProSAR as challenging due to long delays between messages, which would at times slow down work progress. GIZ ProSAR, in contrast, considered the communication with Accord-M a time burden, especially because the time needed for communicating with Accord-M is not officially included in the tasks of GIZ ProSAR staff.

The fact that communication links were strongest within organizational entities is not surprising. In addition, different stakeholders mentioned they communicated most frequently with people they already knew from other contexts, such as having studied together. Cultural and language barriers were frequently mentioned to explain relatively weak exchange between stakeholders from different countries. Finally, interviewees mentioned a communication barrier related to hierarchies: some stakeholders prefer to address other individuals perceived to work at the same level of seniority, because it allows them faster and sometimes informal communication.

With regard to communication channels, all interviewees emphasized that direct, verbal exchange and presentations of results, for example, through workshops, was most helpful. Sharing of information via digital platforms, such as MS Teams, was generally not preferred. For some stakeholders, usage of MS Teams and the uploaded documents were restricted by limited time resources and technical barriers.

### 3.2.3 Perceptions about the Accompanying Research project

#### **What do stakeholders know about the AR project?**

Most stakeholders from NGOs were not well aware about the AR project (Accord-M), nor were they familiar with the research results. We found that even members of GIZ ProSAR and one academic advisor were not well informed about the project structure and the division of responsibilities and tasks. Information on research results, shared via MS Teams, had not been read by NGOs and most GIZ ProSAR staff. Overall,

stakeholders expressed two types of expectations towards AR: most stakeholders saw added value in the scientific recommendations, which can help prepare and adjust the interventions. Some NGO stakeholders rather hoped for the development of new ideas and strategies.

### **What benefits do stakeholders see in the AR project?**

Interviewees generally perceived the AR cooperation as beneficial, especially those who had participated in the results dissemination workshop (see Section 2.4). The research results presented during the workshop were considered as relevant to the NGOs' work, in particular by highlighting and discussing crucial obstacles to the practical implementation of their activities. Two studies were considered particularly useful by the implementation partners: the Positive Deviance analysis (Rafanomezantsoa et al., forthcoming), which provided inspiration for likely viable interventions, and the *ex-ante* impact assessment of proposed interventions (Tojo-Mandaharisoa et al., 2022), which studied beneficiaries' preferences among potential interventions.

In general, most interviewees appreciated the possibility to access and demand academic advice. It was also highlighted as a benefit that the interests and ideas of GIZ ProSAR could be transformed into research by the accompanying research team. On a personal level, two stakeholders had made use of Accord-M's scientific advice and used it for the design of monitoring and evaluation systems within ProSAR. Lastly, one stakeholder perceived the link to the scientific community and the chance that Accord-M publishes collected data of the project, as most valuable.

### **What challenges do stakeholders identify for the AR project?**

In addition to benefits, multiple challenges and shortcomings of Accord-M were mentioned. Above all, many interviewees stated that the distribution of responsibilities, rights, and duties within the AR cooperation were unclear and confusing to them. This was true for communication (*who has the right or duty to speak to the researchers, and about what topics?*) as well as for the translation of the research results into practice (*to what extent are implementation partners allowed or expected to consider the research results in their activities?*). We found that stakeholders of GIZ ProSAR were not fully aware of the information needs of the NGOs. Because cooperation and communication structures within the AR network are not well defined and not agreed upon by all sides, GIZ ProSAR could not fulfil its bridging function effectively. Moreover, this bridging function was perceived controversially: GIZ ProSAR stakeholders expressed concern about the potential loss of important information if information is exchanged between other stakeholders only via them, and encouraged more direct communication between Accord-M and NGOs. At the same time, one NGO stakeholder mentioned reservations concerning direct exchange with Accord-M. There was some hesitation because the partner organizations are committed to the expectations of their donor (GIZ ProSAR), and rights and duties regarding engagement with the accompanying researchers were not clearly defined. Communicating via GIZ ProSAR was thus the safer option.

The relative unclarity of how Accord-M relates to ProSAR was perceived as a challenge by GIZ ProSAR, too. Since no member of GIZ ProSAR was officially mandated to lead the communication with Accord-M, this caused an additional – unpaid – time burden for GIZ ProSAR staff. Consequently, Accord-M stakeholders perceived having low priority within the day-to-day activities of GIZ ProSAR.

ProSAR activities are carried out via a cascade model, where information trickles down from GIZ ProSAR to the NGOs and further to the on-the-ground work with beneficiaries. This circumstance created challenges for stakeholders of Accord-M, who mentioned uncertainty about the right operational level of information sharing (*who should be the target group of research results?*). This unclarity was reflected by stakeholders from both GIZ ProSAR and NGOs, who questioned the usefulness of research outputs for on-the-ground technicians, who are bound to follow the instructions reaching them through the cascade model. Higher-

level decision-makers within NGOs, however, were said to have limited time capacities for reading reports or taking additional trainings.

As a practical challenge for AR, it was questioned whether the research team – who can only spend limited time in the field – is able to produce profound studies that adequately analyse different, in many ways heterogeneous sub-regions simultaneously.

Lastly, another important challenge related to the multiple organizational entities having to coordinate their different timelines. For example, the overall intervention design and impact indicators had been defined by GIZ ProSAR and GIZ Bonn before the beginning of the ProSAR project. Once it began, there was little flexibility to amend the timelines, as GIZ ProSAR stakeholders were now committed to these plans. Therefore, Accord-M stakeholders questioned the extent to which research results could actually influence ProSAR activities ‘retroactively’. In a similar vein, Accord-M’s PhD students and their academic supervisors had not been involved in the design of the AR project, which made it difficult to align the research tasks with their thesis requirements and left limited time for preparing research trips. Implementation partners stated that the results dissemination workshop – which was held roughly one year after the NGOs were commissioned by GIZ ProSAR – came too late, as many results would have been needed *before* any implementation started.

These challenges, along with the limited knowledge about the AR cooperation and its results, meant that many stakeholders doubted that Accord-M had had impacts on ProSAR. Still, some stakeholders highlighted effects concerning their individual work, such as the design of M&E systems.

### **How could the AR project be improved?**

#### *More direct cooperation between NGOs and accompanying researchers*

According to interviewees, NGOs should be involved early in the research design process and results should be shared back and discussed directly with them (reducing communicative work for GIZ ProSAR). Beyond higher-level decision-makers, also on-the-ground technicians should be involved, as they have good knowledge about challenges and information gaps in implementation. Despite the demand for more direct communication between researchers and NGOs, the implementation partners also called for keeping this communication burden low and well-organized.

#### *In-person communication of research outputs*

Interviewees had different perceptions on adequate output formats for research results. In general, though, dissemination workshops and personal exchange were suggested for disseminating research results and discussing their practical implications. This could stimulate more informal exchange and support the translation of findings into practice. In general, outputs should not be in academic language.

#### *Clearer and more transparent governance of the AR system*

According to interviewees, rights and responsibilities of the different stakeholder groups with regard to the AR project should be clearly outlined and officially endorsed by GIZ ProSAR. Through regular, periodic exchange, NGOs and researchers should mutually inform the other about planned and ongoing activities and ask for feedback. To motivate such transparency, Accord-M should more clearly present their research interests and the purpose of the AR project, as well as possible future benefits of the research partnership for the NGOs. Lastly, Accord-M should get a point of contact within GIZ ProSAR, i.e., a GIZ staff member officially assigned to oversee the AR cooperation.

### 3.3 Participant observation

The results dissemination workshop was attended by 14 NGO members, one participant from ORN (*office régional de la nutrition*, a public body in charge of promotion nutrition and food security), and one from DRAE (*direction régionale de l'agriculture et l'élevage*, regional ministry of agriculture and livestock husbandry). Participants included field technicians and regional project heads of ProSAR. All participants claimed that the studies, as well as the results, were new to them. Research presentations were followed by extensive and controversial discussion, with the presenters (Accord-M PhD students) and between the participants alike. The event showed that the different NGOs had different approaches and levels of knowledge about the ProSAR interventions, and different interests concerning AR.

## 4. Recommendations

Our analysis of communication and cooperation within a pilot AR project accompanying a GIZ-led development project in Madagascar highlighted many challenges, but also opportunities. Main obstacles were related to the limited time commitments and high work burdens of stakeholders, limited awareness about the AR project, and unclear assignment of responsibilities, leading to inadequate communication. Many of the stakeholders interviewed for this study have critically reflected on these challenges and have suggested ideas to address them. In the following part, we discuss the challenges and potential, practical opportunities for realizing successful AR projects in the development sector.

### 1. Diverse perspectives are needed already during AR project design

A successful AR project needs constructive, motivated participation by all its stakeholders. Thus, to ensure the AR project will be in the interest of all stakeholders involved, and to give all stakeholders equal opportunities to influence research foci and the rules of communication and cooperation, it is recommended to involve diverse stakeholder groups already in the design of the AR project. NGOs, PhD students, and academic advisors had not been involved in the design of Accord-M, and hence experienced difficulties that could have been anticipated and mitigated. Strategically integrating the AR project as a relevant component of the accompanied development project, rather than a 'nice-to-have' asset, is key for meaningful AR.

### 2. The AR team needs to agree on clear, realistic objectives with the other stakeholders

In this case study, many stakeholders were not well aware about the objectives, mandate, and capacities of the AR project. Agreeing with all other stakeholders on (shared) objectives is crucial to get everyone engaged. This needs to depart from a thorough and transparent, initial self-presentation of the research team, its expectations, and intended research activities. But as the AR project progresses, regularly checking back with other stakeholders is a must: is the AR project still pursuing objectives that align with the expectations of the other stakeholders? This also requires a candid discussion between researchers and other stakeholders on what is feasible and what is not. Our case study revealed contrasting expectations among NGOs: some hope for general insights that can be easily transferred to other projects, others expected highly context-specific, practical recommendations. Recurrent deliberations among all stakeholders can set (and keep) the AR project on an agreed, realistic path.



### 3. At all times, AR stakeholders need to be aware about all other stakeholders and their roles

In large project networks, it is easy to lose track of what other stakeholders are involved and what roles they fulfil. This lack of overview risks decreasing the efficiency of cooperation and communication, and may thus lead to less meaningful AR. This challenge could be addressed by developing a stakeholder map, including information on organizations, staff positions, tasks and responsibilities, and preferred contact information of the persons. Keeping this map up to date is a responsibility that should be explicitly assigned to the central stakeholders of the development project.

### 4. Roles and responsibilities with regard to AR need to be clearly defined

Our case study highlighted the importance of clearly defined and documented responsibilities, rights, and communication structures specific to the AR process. Already during AR project design, but at the latest, in a joint kick-off workshop, all involved stakeholders should communicate their expectations towards the AR as well as their estimated communication needs (with whom? about which topics? in what form? how often?). This way, communication pathways and decision-making procedures within the AR network can be defined. These competences should be officially included within the contracts and budgets for each stakeholder, to recognize AR as a relevant part of the development project. Specifically, translating research findings into practice is the dominant objective, but also a major challenge for impactful AR cooperation. As no stakeholder group can steer this effort on its own, there is a need for an efficient decision-making mechanism. For example, all research findings (along with their respective target groups) could be reported by the researchers to the overall project manager or donor. In a subsequent step, the researchers and target group could jointly report in what ways these findings are being used (or why not used).

### 5. Research outputs need to explicitly fit well-defined target groups

To prevent information overload and resulting disinterest in the AR project, stakeholders should primarily receive outputs that address their actual, declared information needs. All outputs thus need to address a clearly defined target group, which should be reflected in the design of knowledge products and language used by researchers in conveying the findings.

### 6. All stakeholders need permanent insight into everyone's timelines

Full transparency on planned and ongoing activities, both on the side of the AR team and the development project, can enhance the integration of research results into practice. Right timing of both research and dissemination activities is critical for meaningful AR. Transparency on timelines can also enable more efficient cooperation: When accompanying researchers are informed well in advance of planned project activities, they can actively approach stakeholders with relevant findings. And if development stakeholders know in advance of planned research activities, they can contribute research questions relevant to their own work. To provide a good overview of timelines, an online management tool could be used. Although time effort is needed to develop and maintain the tool, it can save much communication time during the whole AR project period.

## 7. Regular in-person meetings of all AR stakeholders are needed

In addition to bilateral exchange between the AR team and certain groups of stakeholders, or online insight into other stakeholders' activity progress, all stakeholder should regularly get an overall insight into the activities of the AR project. The sense of feeling familiar and engaged with the AR project can increase individual commitment and the quality of cooperation within the entire network. Through in-person meetings of the full AR network, at least once per year, all stakeholders should get an overview of the recent, ongoing, and planned AR activities. A first kick-off workshop, specifically around the AR project, is crucial to allow all stakeholders to get familiar and facilitate informal, subsequent communication.

## 8. The AR project needs to maintain flexibility for unforeseen changes within the accompanied project

Unexpected changes in staffing, timelines, work foci, and other features of the development project can occur at any moment. In case of important changes – for example, new stakeholder groups entering the AR network, or natural disasters disrupting timelines –, it may be useful to re-affirm or re-negotiate objectives (see 2.), stakeholder network (3.), and roles and responsibilities (4.), adjust target groups and timelines (5., 6.), or even hold an out-of-schedule all-hands meeting (7.).

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