

## SOME LESSONS LEARNT FROM THE RIU BEST BETS PROCESS

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### INTRODUCTION

RIU's Best Bets programme aims to put existing agricultural research into use through partnerships in which the private sector plays a significant role. In October 2009 RIU published a call for the first round of Best Bets targeting East, Central and Southern Africa, inviting the submission of brief two-page concept notes that addressed four criteria. These were:

- The proposal should be grounded in rigorous research in agriculture, including fisheries and forestry
- The originators of the research should be involved in the programme in a significant way so that they are able to apply their tacit knowledge and learning to the programme
- The proposal will be expected to achieve significant development impact at scale in East and/or Central Africa (and perhaps beyond)
- The proposal should comprise a consortium of partners (e.g. academic, public sector, NGO) led by an African institution and should include a private sector partner with evidence of support, which could be financial or in-kind

Advertisements were placed in a regional newspaper that covered Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Rwanda, selected national newspapers in Malawi and Zambia, and was also posted on the RIU and Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA; [www.fara-africa.org](http://www.fara-africa.org)) websites. In response 105 concept notes were received, of which 11 were shortlisted for further consideration. One of these, which involved creating a cassava flour value chain to supply a Zambia brewery, was placed on hold pending clarification from DFID on their policy on supporting alcohol-related projects. From the remaining 10, two pairs of bids which appeared to offer opportunities for synergy accepted RIU's suggestion to amalgamate their bids. After a process which involved submitting business plans and attending the Best Bets event - held in Nairobi in November 2009 and inspired by the BBC television programme Dragons' Den - five were eventually funded.

In January 2010, RIU launched a second round of Best Bets, targeted at West Africa.

Advertisements were placed in selected newspapers in Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone, posted on the RIU and FARA websites, and also awareness was raised via a commissioned news story distributed to local radio stations in the region. In response 87 concept notes were received: just two, however, were considered to warrant further consideration. To date (May 2010) one of these

proposals has submitted a satisfactory business plan, passed due diligence checks and has been funded as an RIU Best Bet.

It was apparent to the RIU team that there were differences in the quality and relevance of proposals submitted under round one and round two of Best Bets. This report aims first to analyse the characteristics of the proposals submitted under the two calls and then to suggest possible reasons for any differences observed and identify possible steps to overcome any constraints and weaknesses in the Best Bets process. For simplicity, round one of Best Bets will be referred to as East Africa and round two as West Africa.

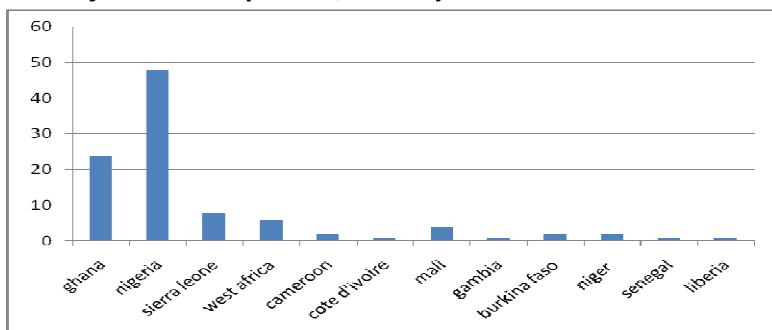
## ANALYSIS OF CONCEPT NOTES

### Country focus

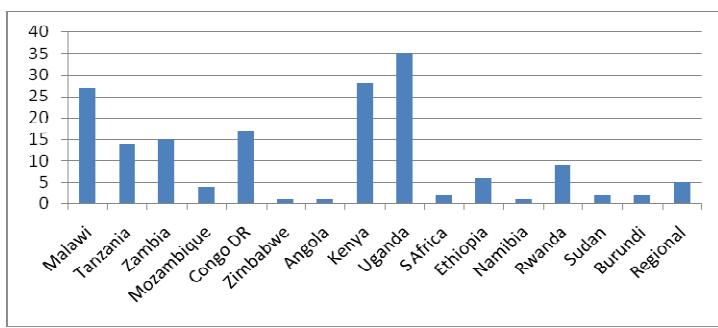
In West Africa, 80 of the 87 proposals came from the countries where the call was advertised in the national newspapers: Nigeria led with 48 proposals, with Ghana (24) and Sierra Leone (8) coming in second and third, respectively. In East Africa the majority of the concept notes came from Uganda (35), Kenya (28) and Malawi (27), but the DRC (17), Zambia (15), Tanzania (14) and Rwanda (9) were also well represented.

Some teams proposed to work regionally or in more than one country: this applied to 39 concept notes from East Africa and 8 from West Africa.

### *West Africa – Concept Note, Country Focus*



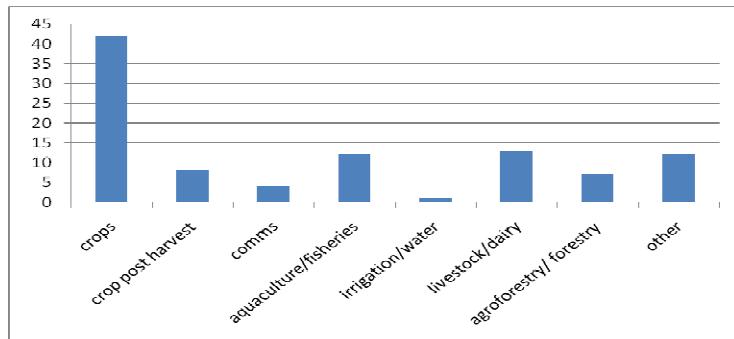
### *East Africa – Concept Note, Country Focus*



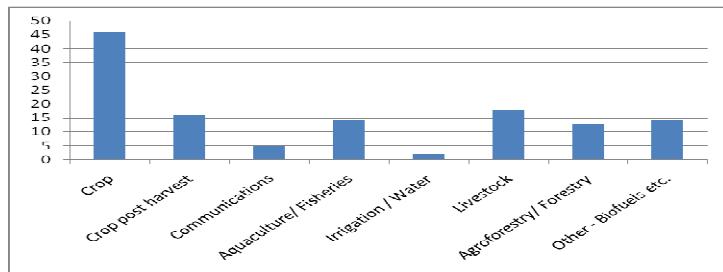
### Concept note subject focus

The vast majority of the concept notes related to crops or crop protection. This is perhaps because the DFID-funded Crop Protection Programme was the largest of the RNRRS programmes. The focus of the concept notes followed a similar pattern in both West and East Africa.

### **West Africa – Concept note focus**



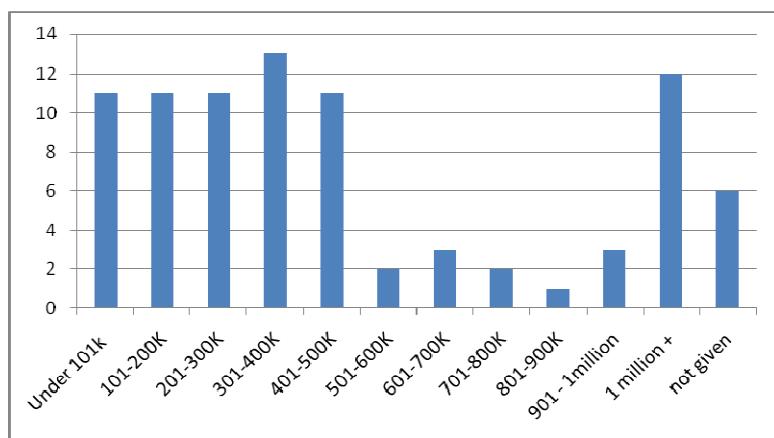
### **East Africa - Concept note focus**



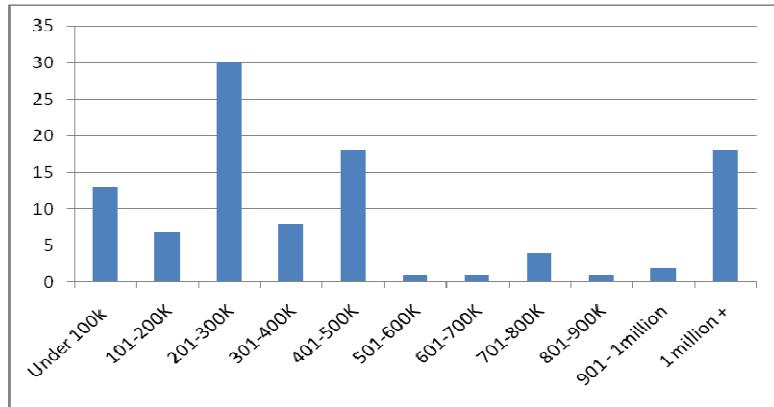
### **Budget**

In West Africa most of the proposals (70%) had a budget of up to £500,000, with a significant minority (14%) requesting over £1 million. In East Africa, one third sought between £200,000 and £300,000, two-thirds sought up to £500,000, while 17% requested more than £1 million.

### **West Africa - Budget**



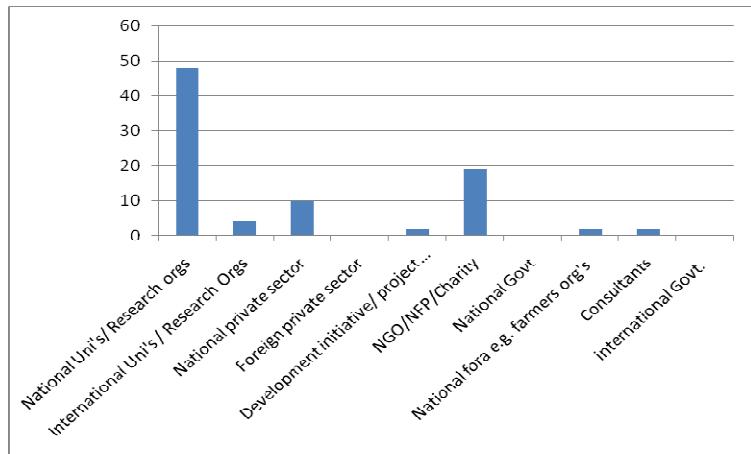
### **East Africa – Budget**



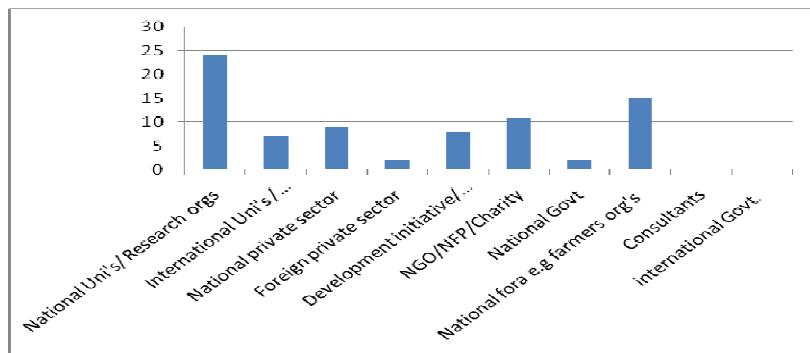
### **Lead partner**

In West Africa the majority (55%) of the proposals were led by national research organizations and universities, and NGOs/not-for-profit sector, followed by the private sector. In East Africa, again most proposals were led by national research organizations and universities (22%), but here national fora (e.g. farmers' organisations) came second (14%), followed by the NGO/not-for-profit sector, development initiatives and the national and foreign private sector.

### **West Africa – Lead partner type**



### **East Africa – Lead partner type**



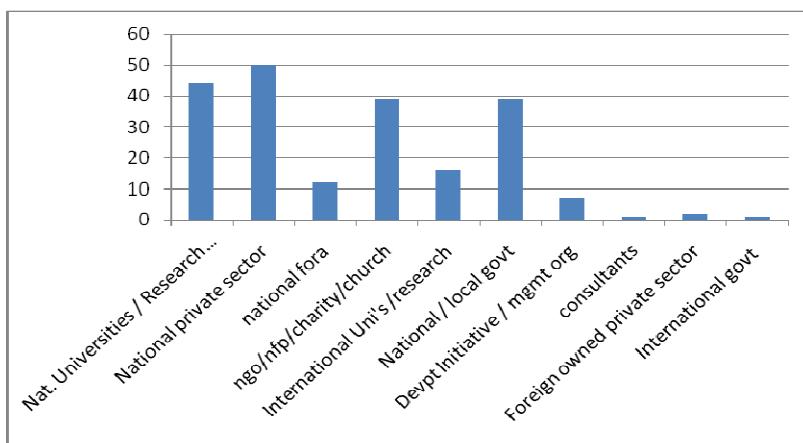
### Partner type

Generally, the East Africa concept notes had a broader range of types of partner organisation: West Africa had a total of 211 partners and 87 concept notes, an average of 2.4 partners per proposal; East Africa had a total of 305 partners for 105 concept notes, an average of 2.9 partners per proposal.

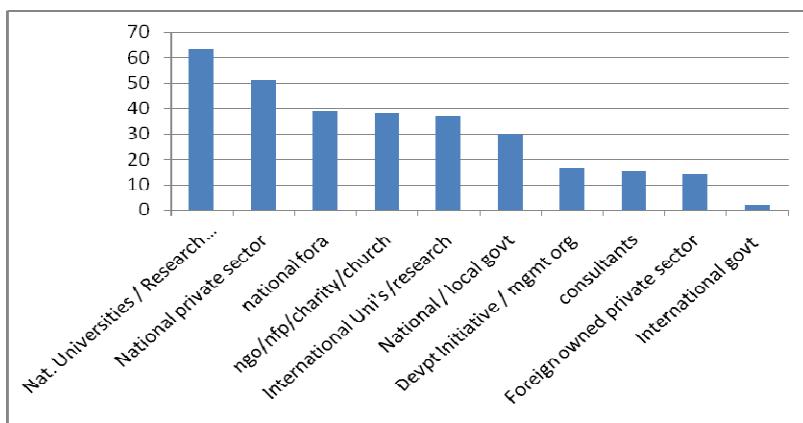
The call stated that proposals ‘should include a private sector partner’: about half of the proposals received from the two regions had national private sector partners. Generally, West Africa proposals relied more on public sector partners.

National fora, such as farmers’ organizations, were more commonly included as partners in East compared to West Africa, and there was also more involvement of international research and private sector partners in the East Africa proposals. East Africa proposals also had more input from national and international consultants.

#### ***West Africa - Partner Type***



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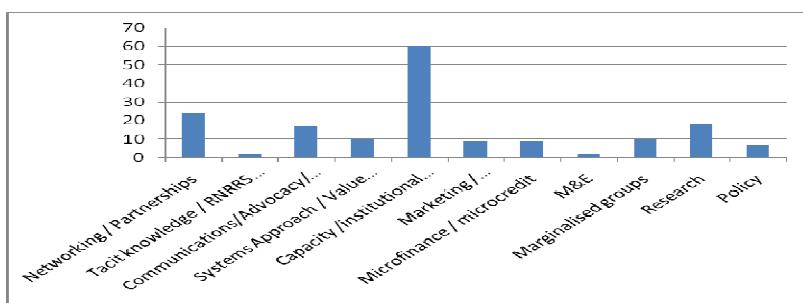


### **Proposal characteristics**

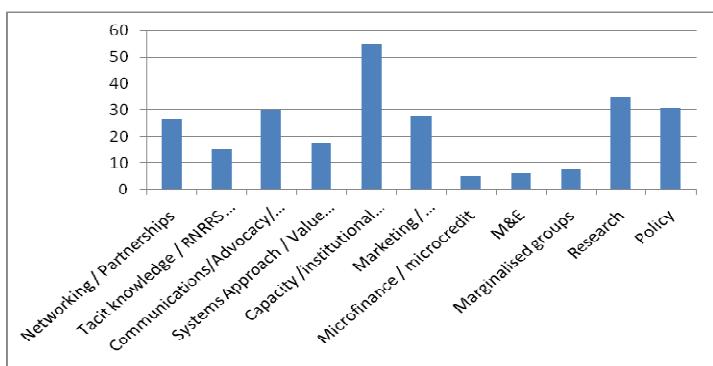
Most of the proposals aimed to achieve a combination of capacity building, increased production and increased income for the target beneficiaries – who were usually smallholder farmers. When the proposals were scored for a series of characteristics relevant to the Best Bets call (see graph below), on average those submitted under the East Africa call scored higher than those from West Africa.

East Africa came out stronger in terms of policy, marketing/commercialisation, communications/advocacy, and tacit knowledge, while West Africa was marginally stronger in microcredit/finance and targeting marginalised groups.

### ***West Africa – Concept note characteristics***



### ***East Africa – Concept note characteristics***



### **Comparison of the reviewers' scores**

The reviewers who developed the shortlists were asked to consider the following criteria when considering the concept notes:

1. Number of new beneficiaries (actual and potential)
2. Likelihood of achieving sustained impact, after funding has ceased
3. Appropriate budget
4. Likelihood of success
5. Learning of lessons during the process
6. Inclusion of those with tacit knowledge of the research
7. Relevant involvement of the private sector
8. Fulfilling the potential for spillovers
9. Appropriate team members
10. Likelihood of bringing benefits to marginalised groups
11. Likelihood of bringing environmental benefits
12. Utilises RNRRS outputs

These criteria were used to produce a score out of 70. Not all scores were submitted by all the reviewers but comparing the top ten scored proposals from each region, on average East Africa scored 10 marks higher.

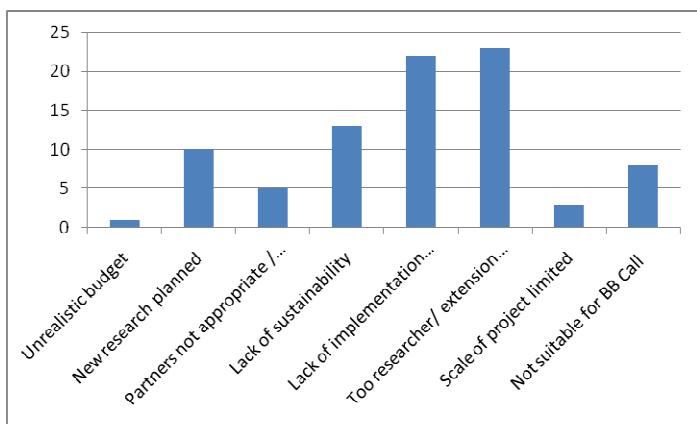
### **Reason for rejection**

Both regions had many concept notes rejected because they mainly wanted to conduct further research rather than put existing research into use. Many concept notes from West Africa were considered to be too 'project-style' in design, often proposing to carry out similar work to that that had been funded in the past with a heavy research and/or extension focus.

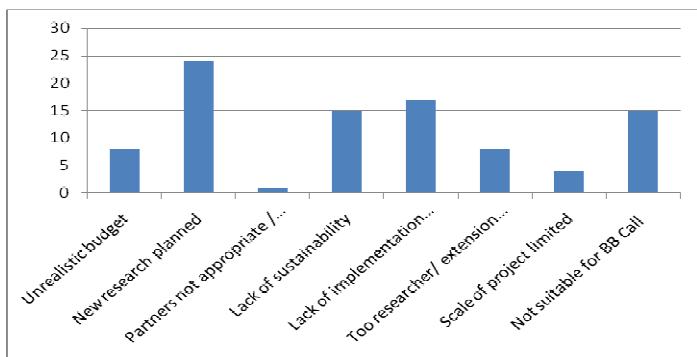
East Africa proposals were more often rejected because of an unrealistic budget than for West Africa.

Some proposals, especially from East Africa, were rejected because little or no attempt had been made to tailor apparently pre-existing proposals to the call. Other reasons for rejection included lack of information on partners, unsuitable partners, no evidence of sustainability, vague implementation plans, or too limited scale of impact.

#### ***West Africa – Reason for rejection***



#### ***East Africa – Reason for rejection***



## LESSONS LEARNED

### Possible reasons for differences between Best Bets proposals from East and West Africa

There was perhaps greater awareness of the call in East Africa compared to West Africa and also more capacity in East Africa for active support by RIU. The RIU management and support team had a much stronger network in East Africa. The teams behind the Best Bets proposals which were eventually funded had often consulted with RIU team members to shape the concept notes and seek clarifications and guidance. In some cases, RIU team members had been involved in the original research projects on which they were based. In other cases, such as Well Told Story's *Shujaaz*, the proposals were actively facilitated by RIU: for example, rather than passively waiting for proposals to be submitted, RIU team members brought the Best Bets initiative to the attention of Well Told Story and made introductions to potential partners. In addition, many proposals from both regions were rejected because they did not adequately address the criteria, were too project-oriented with no clear mechanism to achieve sustainability, lacked detailed explanation of what was going to be implemented, or were for further research rather than putting existing research into use. This suggests that greater investment in raising awareness, providing more guidance as to what was needed and actively helping to develop strong proposals, including brokering partnerships, should be more explicitly included in the Best Bets process. Such an approach is also in resonance with that adopted by the RIU Africa Country Programme, located in Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Tanzania, Sierra Leone and Zambia, where the focus is on building capacity for innovation, promoting effective networking and partnerships, and serving a range of brokering roles to establish effective ways of working between partners and stakeholders.

Although Best Bets was intended as a means to put any suitable existing research into use, research products generated by the DFID-funded RNRRS were expected to be particularly suitable candidates. There were far fewer RNRRS projects located in West Africa compared to East Africa: of the validated RNRRS research outputs previously compiled by RIU, 115 were based on work in East Africa and just 40 in West Africa – although the outputs would often have relevance further afield. Of these, 16 projects in West Africa and 38 in East Africa were considered to have generated research outputs particularly amenable to the involvement of the private sector in putting them into use. This situation was reflected in the West Africa proposals, which had far fewer linkages to RNRRS research than the ones from East Africa. It is striking that four out of the five Best Bets funded in East Africa had strong links to former RNRRS projects, as did the one Best Bet so far funded from the West Africa call.

West Africa proposals tended to rely more on public sector partners than those from East Africa. This is perhaps a reflection of the stronger (but still developing) linkages between the private sector and research communities found in East compared to West Africa. It has also been suggested that strong national SME sectors could have been an important factor in successful Best Bets bids. This may explain, for example, why Kenya did better in the Best Bets process than Sierra Leone; it does not, however, explain why West African countries with strong SME sectors, such as Ghana and Nigeria, did less well than East Africa.

Stronger and broader partnerships, including those involving international partners (research organizations, universities and the private sector) and national and international consultants, in proposals submitted from East Africa may be one factor explaining the higher quality and greater relevance of concept notes submitted compared to those from West Africa.

West Africa proposals also had less time available to achieve impact (approximately 12 months) than those from East Africa (18 months). While neither timescale was considered adequate, the time pressure on West Africa was even more severe.

## CONCLUSION

To ensure wider applicability of the RIU's Best Bets initiative, including in countries with poorly developed private sectors or those with weak linkages between researchers and the private sector, a more proactive approach is required during the concept note writing phase. This could include direct support to the teams developing proposals, brokering stronger partnerships and actively seeking-out promising research-into-use opportunities.

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### Further information

- [info@researchintouse.com](mailto:info@researchintouse.com)
- [www.researchintouse.com](http://www.researchintouse.com)

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