

Session 1: Perceptions of impact assessment for institutional learning and change

Facilitator: John Dixon

Donor demands for evidence of research impact—The case of the CGIAR *David Raitzer, Timothy Kelley and Hans Gregersen*

Ex-post impact assessment (EPIA) is often promoted as a means of offering evidence to funding bodies that agricultural research investments are effectively contributing to the achievement of development goals. In response, impact assessors have produced a great deal of evidence that international agricultural research is an efficient and effective form of investment. Despite these results, international agricultural research, including that of the CGIAR Centers, has at times faced funding shortages. This may indicate that the evidence produced has not been entirely persuasive.

To help foster a more demand-led approach to EPIA, this analysis investigates the information demands of CGIAR members (donors), the primary audience for accountability-oriented EPIA studies. Two methods were applied to analyze information demands and uses. First, an e-mail survey of all CGIAR members was conducted, so as to ascertain preferences for different EPIA approaches, methods and metrics. Subsequently, a second series of interviews of donor representatives was used to explore in more detail how the results from EPIA contribute to funding decisions.

The 24 e-mail survey responses received from 22 member agencies indicate high demand for impact-related information. Analyses of impact “far down the impact pathway” with metrics directly related to poverty and well-being are most frequently claimed to be the most useful. Similarly, a majority of respondents reported “magnitude and distribution of benefits” as the primary determinant of the use of EPIA findings. EPIA conducted by an external assessor was reported as important for credibility by most respondents.

Follow-up interviews of representatives of 26 CGIAR members illustrated that agricultural research funding decisions within member agencies are complex, and the consideration of past patterns of impact in these deliberations is often less than central. Other factors—such as political priorities, perceptions of scientific quality, and desires for funding continuity—also play prominent roles in these decisions, and decision-makers face an onslaught of many forms of information apart from EPIA findings. In this context, brief summaries of EPIA results are critical to capture attention, and the influence of findings is often indirect and “conceptual.” Despite the indirect nature of this influence, the interviewees reiterated strong demand for evidence of impact.

A number of members indicated that the transparency of impact studies could be improved, as certain analyses have been assumption-laden, and insufficient details about the assessed research had been provided in some cases. These audiences also appear to demand EPIA of a broader range of research activities, as “comprehensiveness of coverage” received relatively low ratings. Finally, a greater focus on poverty-related metrics and the distribution of assessed benefits was demanded by a large proportion of interviewees.

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Responses are compared with patterns documented in the broader evaluation literature. The observations of the present study are generally consistent with prior findings that indirect use is predominant. In addition, the information preferences observed—when compared with approaches advocated for internal feedback in the evaluation literature—suggest that the information demands of donors may differ from those of internal audiences.

From impact assessment to learning: Experience with institutional learning and change in the CGIAR

Jamie Watts and Douglas Horton

It is often stated that impact assessments should contribute to learning and program improvement. However, in practice, the links between assessment, learning and change are very weak in the CGIAR. The “Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative” promotes learning-oriented evaluation in the CGIAR that increases the relevance of agricultural research and its contributions to sustainable poverty reduction. At a time of significant transformation in the development community, ILAC offers a framework and tools for critical reflection and analysis at multiple levels. Based on the principles of complex adaptive systems, innovation and organizational learning, ILAC fosters critical reflection and promotes the examination of research paradigms, institutional norms, management practices and professional behavior. The overall goal is to assist CGIAR staff members, programs, Centers and partners to learn more effectively from experience and to use the lessons to improve the design and implementation of agricultural research and development programs.

To support learning and program improvement, the ILAC Initiative works in four broad areas: individual knowledge, skills and professional behaviors; management systems and practices; organizational culture; and the external environment in which CGIAR Centers and programs operate. It is supporting activities in several CGIAR Centers and partner organizations in order to test a range of approaches and illustrate their potential value. This paper outlines the principles underlying the ILAC Initiative and reports on practical experiences with ILAC to date in the CGIAR, including the following:

- Preparing “innovation histories” and “institutional histories” (CIAT and ICRISAT)
- Complementing project-level economic evaluation with institutional and impact-pathway analysis (INIBAP)
- Developing integrated, learning-oriented participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) systems (IPGRI and Global Trust for Plant Genetic Resources)
- Refining participatory “Horizontal Evaluation” approaches (CIP: Papa Andina)

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- Introducing knowledge-sharing approaches into Center annual meetings and reviews (CIAT, CIFOR, CIMMYT)
- Developing a new framework for impact assessment, to address issues of poverty reduction and sustainable development (CIMMYT)
- Building learning dimensions into Center-Commissioned External Reviews (IPGRI)
- Examining how human resource policies and practices influence knowledge sharing and organizational learning (several Centers).