



Rethinking Impact Workshop Key Issues

Six key issues emerged from the **Rethinking Impact Workshop (RIW): Understanding the complexity of poverty and change** held in Cali, Colombia, March 26–28, 2008. The workshop discussed (1) how agricultural and natural-resources research can be more effective in contributing to solutions for poverty alleviation and improving gender, social inclusion and equity; (2) how its impact can be assessed; and (3) how such research and impact assessment can be brought into the mainstream.

A diverse group of over 60 participants (42% women) from 33 organizations (54% CGIAR† and 46% non-CGIAR) attended the meeting. The issues do not represent a consensus of opinion among this diverse group, but rather the perspectives of the meeting sponsors, informed by active input from the Workshop participants before, during and after the meeting.

Much of the discussion at the workshop was focused on the CGIAR and the key issues are primarily oriented toward the CGIAR. However, they would certainly be relevant to other organizations with similar goals and challenges. Four issues relate to rethinking how impact is defined and managing research to achieve it. Another two relate specifically to impact-assessment approaches. This reflects the critical linkage between how impact is defined and how it is assessed, and puts the appropriate emphasis on the former.

Enhancing the contributions of research to poverty alleviation

Issue 1: We know that the causes of poverty, gender and social inequality and exclusion are multi-dimensional and complex. We don't understand enough about that complexity and the implications for how best to target and manage research and development efforts to more effectively address these complex issues. We need to keep increasing our understanding of these complex dynamics if we are to effectively link research to poverty alleviation and other development issues.

Issue 2: A lot of our 'on the ground' experience shows that distinctions between research and development are breaking down. Rather than aiming to isolate its research from development, the comparative advantage of CGIAR science lies in conducting use-oriented research that deliberately aims to link knowledge with action.

† The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) is a strategic alliance of members, partners and international agricultural centers that mobilizes science to benefit the poor (*see* www.cgiar.org).

The **Rethinking Impact Workshop (RIW): Understanding the complexity of poverty and change** held in Cali, Colombia, March 26–28, 2008, was organized and sponsored by the CGIAR Systemwide Program on Participatory Research and Gender Analysis for Technology Development and Institutional Innovation (PRGA Program), the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) Innovation Works Programme and the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative.

Issue 3: Researchers must play an important role in helping to link academia, farmers, policy-makers, civil society and market forces for knowledge creation and sharing as the basis for effective and sustainable action. However, research organizations must recognize the legitimacy and challenges of such boundary-spanning work, reward it and dedicate sufficient time and resources to it.

Issue 4: Learning organizations that are effective at innovation are also likely to be effective in engaging end-users. We need to thoughtfully assess who to involve and how, using participatory action research, planning and priority-setting processes, evaluation and other mechanisms in order to engage farmers and the poor, or the civil society organizations that represent them, in meaningful ways at appropriate points throughout the research process. Furthermore, we need to pay close attention to power inequalities in such processes.

Assessing the impact of research for poverty alleviation

Issue 5: Traditional economic impact-assessment methods (i.e. rate of return studies) alone are not well suited for evaluating the types of complex activities and roles described above. An assessment of CGIAR Financial Plans and the Workshop papers indicates that the CGIAR's work is no longer concentrated around traditional crop-improvement research and that a wide range of methods is already in use to assess the diverse outcomes and impacts arising from the CGIAR investment portfolio. Thus, there is an urgent need for CGIAR management to acknowledge the legitimacy of this diversity and the broad range of impact-assessment methods needed to evaluate it.

Issue 6: Capacity is needed if we are to adopt new approaches to research for poverty reduction and associated impact assessment. Capacity includes technical skills, and skills in other areas such as collaborative problem-solving, facilitation and systems thinking. Social-science staffing in research centers needs to be adequate (including political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, human ecologists, economists, psychologists and possibly others). Policies, procedures and accountability mechanisms need to be adjusted and organizational learning capacity increased. However, capacity ultimately depends on the commitment of top-level leaders.

It is important that these issues be followed up by concrete actions so that new ways of thinking can become institutionalized in new ways of working. Recommendations for action by CGIAR management are described in *Rethinking Impact Workshop Brief No. 2*. Actions being undertaken by Workshop participants and organizers to respond to these issues are described in *Rethinking Impact Workshop Brief No. 3*. These issues and recommendations are reinforced by the experiences of others, notably the lessons from the IFPRI-led studies of the impact of agricultural research on poverty, and more recently, a letter from the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) to the CGIAR External Review team summarizing issues from the Farmer First Revisited meeting. The strong message from RIW was a call to action to move ahead now to implement this new agenda.

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ILAC Initiative; PRGA Program; ILRI, 2008. Rethinking Impact Workshop Key Issues. *Rethinking Impact Workshop Brief No. 1*. ILAC Initiative, Rome; PRGA Program, Cali, Colombia; ILRI, Nairobi, 2p.

