



Suggested Actions for CGIAR† Leaders

This *Brief* provides practical, concrete action options for CGIAR management to address the key issues raised at the **Rethinking Impact Workshop (RIW): Understanding the complexity of poverty and change**.

Enhancing the contributions of research to poverty alleviation

In order to better manage the complex and collaborative programs that many at the Workshop believe will contribute to poverty alleviation, the CGIAR should consider making a distinction between relatively ‘complex’ research more likely to require an active collaborative and dynamic approach, and relatively ‘linear’ research, which is more predictable and more likely to have a single causal strand directly related to the intervention.

Examples of more linear research include: conserving, generating and disseminating knowledge about gene pools; molecular characterization of indigenous livestock breeds; enhancing crop tolerance to abiotic stresses; and increasing micronutrient content through biotechnologies and breeding.

Examples of more complex research include: strengthening knowledge of under-utilized plant genetic resources and identifying pro-poor opportunities for their use; enhancing opportunities for exploitation of high-value agricultural and forest products by the poor; developing options for sustainable management of water, land and forest resources targeted to the poor; and improving policies and facilitating institutional innovation supporting poor women in particular.

Research management and evaluation procedures can then be differentiated according to approaches best suited to degree of complexity. Job descriptions, work-plans and performance assessments for senior scientists and managers should be reviewed to ensure that those who manage complex research are spanning boundaries between policy, civil society, private sector, farmers and local communities. Efforts by scientists and managers to do this should be recognized and rewarded. Performance measurement, medium-term planning, and other planning and evaluation mechanisms should recognize scientists’ critical capacity-development role.

It is time for the CGIAR to present a clear strategy and code of conduct for engaging users (including farmers, the poor and the civil society organizations that represent them) in on-the-ground research processes. In a practical sense, this could translate into better representation of civil society organizations, anthropologists, sociologists and political scientists on high-level boards and committees, and standards for engaging users in all stages of the research process.

The CGIAR should ensure that it has adequate capacity across the range of social-science disciplines related to the many social, institutional and cultural systems affecting the farm, and capacity for inter-

† 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).

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disciplinary research management (among social-science disciplines and between social and natural sciences).

Assessing the impact of research for poverty alleviation

The CGIAR guidelines for impact assessment currently being finalized (based on a rate of return methodology alone) are not adequate for much of the research it conducts. We urge management to support the rapid development of another set of impact-assessment guidelines specifically for evaluating complex collaborative research, and to adapt the performance measurement and other systems to reflect these new approaches. Without them, we risk inappropriately assessing the work we are doing that is most likely to lead to sustainable solutions to poverty, and possibly even driving it out of the CGIAR research portfolio.

More realism needs to be applied to the concept of attribution and causation within complex collaborative research, where impacts are not likely to be attributable to the CGIAR or single causes. Knowing that different collaborators play different roles over time and multiple causal strands contribute to impact, we should focus assessments on contribution rather than attribution. Over-emphasis on attribution may damage the trust needed for effective collaboration. In addition, greater emphasis needs to be placed on understanding adaptation processes rather than adoption *per se* of finished technology.

A range of methods and approaches should be made available and used for the evaluation of impacts of complex interventions. Mixed methodologies are needed to assess different kinds of data at different levels and scales (e.g. changes at the biological, social and individual level, in the short, medium and long term, and at the farm, community and higher scales). Skills should be built to ensure that adequate capacity exists to apply a range of methods (including qualitative), and portals or source-books developed to facilitate wide and open-access to a broad range of methods.

Participants and communities in collaborative research should be able to define their own impacts and outcomes on their own terms. Currently, too much focus is put on assessing a narrow range of impacts defined by the CGIAR.

Impact assessment should be an integral part of a comprehensive evaluation process, and the focus shifted from *ex-post* evaluations done long after the ending of an 'intervention' to *ex-ante* and ongoing efforts to develop causal models and re-assess them as they evolve over time. Evaluation within complex systems should be managed as an integral part of the development process, built into the effort from the earliest planning stage, and given attention throughout the life of a project or program.

Finally, while changes in processes and procedures are important, the CGIAR should take steps to build capacity for learning (both internal and through strategic partnerships). Because complex systems by definition are always changing, organizations need capacity to recognize and adapt to changing situations. Capacities associated with learning include: seeking out alternative viewpoints and opposing ideas; spending time on problem identification, reflection and knowledge-sharing; understanding perspectives of stakeholders, 'clients' and technological trends; tolerance for risk and uncertainty; dialogue and participatory decision-making; and, better understanding of the larger political and social context in which interventions take place, and its contribution to change.

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