

Assessing Social Innovations in Agricultural Research and Development Partnerships¹

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Abstract

There has been a move from output assessment of international research and development interventions (input >> activities >> outputs) to include outcome assessment (outputs >> outcomes >> impacts). Outcome assessment emphasizes the impacts of interventions on social goals, such as poverty reduction, social inclusion and environmental protection. While this shift broadened the scope of monitoring and evaluation literature to address social change, systems of innovation thinking, particularly in rural development and agriculture, informs that the dominant paradigm of impact assessment should be complemented by social innovation assessment (SIA), providing research and development actors with critical learning lessons. Although the system of innovation framework has appeared as a relatively more holistic learning framework, analytical and methodological techniques to assess innovation performance, specifically social innovation performance are still emerging. To this end, this paper integrates two distant bodies of literature – the literature on impact assessment of research and development interventions, and the literature on social psychology of assessing learning and innovations. Based on case studies on stakeholder collaboration for innovations in rice and mango, respectively in Nepal and mango, this research identified critical incidents that helped or hindered learning and innovations during the decade-long interventions under the DFID's Renewable Natural Resources Research Strategy (RNRRS) programme between 1995 and 2006. Based on this qualitative study, an innovation assessment tool was developed in the form of a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire includes statements about the critical incidents and mode of stakeholder interactions to be ranked on a four point scale depending on how often the statements apply to the respondents' current organizational environments. The SIA provides critical learning lessons for social innovation generation and overall performance improvement in collaborative agricultural research and development interventions at the organizational, network and system levels.

Key Words: agriculture, systems of innovation, social innovation, India, Nepal, South Asia

¹ A paper prepared for the workshop on “Rethinking Impact: Understanding the Complexity of Poverty and Change”, Cali-Colombia, March 26-28, 2008. An earlier version of this paper was presented in the “2017: The Workplace” conference at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, October 14-16, 2007