

Shared Learning to Enhance Research Priority Assessment Practices

Contact Information – Project Leader

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Project Details

Title of Proposal	Shared Learning to Enhance Research Priority Assessment Practices
Area (please include one area: KS in Research; Institutional KS; Virtual Team)	KS in Research
List of staff/partners and expertise working on the project	Bioversity Int. (Jamie Watts), CGIAR Science Council (Peter Gardiner and Jim Ryan), CIAT (Sophie Alvarez), CIMMYT (John Dixon, Dave Hodson, Roberto LaRovere), CIP (Graham Thiele), Concordia University (Ronald Mackay), CPWF (Boro Douthwaite), ICARDA (Mazen El-Solh and Kamel Shideed), ICRISAT (Cynthia Bantilan, Dyno Keatinge, and Jupiter Ndjeunga), IFPRI (Stanley Wood and Jock Anderson) IITA (Arega Alene, Victor Manyong and Diakalia Sanogo), ILRI (Patti Kristjanson, Tom Randolph, Robin Reid and Philip Thornton), USDA Economic Research Service (Keith Fuglie), WARDA (Aliou Diagne), Virginia Polytechnic University (George Norton)
Project Duration using Grant Funds (in month)	8
Country(ies) of Implementation / Languages used or needed for virtual team projects	Benin, Canada, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Italy, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Tanzania, and USA/ English

Problem definition

Public sector international agricultural¹ research represents only a small share of the world's agricultural research portfolio, so it is crucial that these scarce resources are invested effectively. In the absence of market forces, empirical analysis is needed to direct limited resources to those research areas that have the greatest potential to produce benefits for the poor and the environment.

Considerable effort has been invested by the CGIAR centres and the broader agricultural research community to develop systematic and transparent methods for identifying research topics with the greatest impact potential. These methods typically rely on *ex ante* indices of expected economic, poverty and environmental benefits, and attempt to explore tradeoffs among intended objectives. In turn, these estimates rely on articulation of “impact pathways,” including consideration of the probability of research success, likely patterns of adoption and indirect effects.

Priority assessment can be an important “learning” tool, as past evaluations can help to inform predictions regarding the adoption potential of recommendations and technologies under specific conditions. In addition, priority assessment is an important way to engage partners and external stakeholders in a process of shared reflection over the validity of assumptions underpinning impact pathways. Priority assessment also can be a critical tool for monitoring and evaluation, as the process can be used to establish benchmarks for appraisal of progress and the validity of assumptions.

Priority assessment methods are particularly well developed for commodity improvement programmes, which have the longest history of research in the CGIAR. However, innovation is needed for other newer areas of the research portfolio of the CGIAR and partners, which have impact pathways that are more difficult to predict, and benefits that are more difficult to quantify. As a result, dedicated effort is needed to support innovation and learning for enhanced priority assessment methods.

While individual priority assessment efforts in the centres have often been novel and systematic, there has been no forum or body in the System that has specifically focused upon promotion of priority assessment innovations. Rather, the findings and methods of centre level priority assessment efforts have often been subsumed by competing forms of information. As priority assessment is a key learning tool, improving priority assessment practices is a key means of “double loop learning” (learning how to learn), which has received inadequate attention in the CGIAR and partners.

To rectify this, a systemwide partnership on priority assessment has been developing over the past year. This was initiated with a side meeting at the International Association of Agricultural Economists, where three CGIAR centres (ILRI, IFPRI and CIMMYT), a donor agency (ACIAR) and a Science Council member presented experiences with priority assessment, which were

¹ For simplicity, “agriculture” is used in this document as a comprehensive term for all natural resources management activities, including for forests and aquatic resources.

actively discussed among a larger group of participants, which included representatives of nearly every IARC, a number of partners, and donor representatives. This has been followed with virtual discussions, and an informal meeting at the Impact Assessment Focal Point workshop in late 2006, at which it was decided to collectively document experiences with the topic, as a step towards further collaboration. This proposal principally concerns the collective compendium, but should be seen as an intermediate output, to be followed with further action to share lessons and experiences.

Results and objectives

Intended Outcome: Improved targeting of CGIAR and partner research to research areas with the greatest impact potential through the application of enhanced priority assessment approaches

Users:

- Research evaluators, planners and managers in: NARS, the CGIAR, Universities and Advanced Research Institutes; Representatives of agencies that fund agricultural research

Intended use: Identified innovative collaborative priority assessment approaches and lessons are applied, so as to enhance the transparency, inclusiveness and effectiveness of research planning processes and allocation decisions.

Objective:

- Improved innovation, documentation and communication of collaborative priority assessment approaches within the CGIAR System and partners

Outputs:

- Documented and shared lessons regarding the application of an array of collaborative priority assessment approaches in different research contexts
- Innovative approaches for collaborative priority assessment of policy oriented and natural resources management research

Means of delivery:

- Compendium on priority assessment practices in the CGIAR and partners
- Virtual discussion forum
- Symposia and workshops on priority assessment (after end of project period)

Project implementation

The flagship product of the initiative is a compendium that will share experiences and innovations with various priority assessment methods in the CGIAR and partners at various levels, and with respect to a diverse array of research areas. The compendium includes case chapters from the following:

- ASARECA/IFPRI
- CGIAR Science Council
- CIFOR
- CIP
- CIMMYT
- CPWF/CIAT/Bioversity/CIP/ICRISAT
- ICARDA
- ICRISAT
- IITA
- ILRI
- WARDA

Each of these chapters (currently being prepared) takes an “After Action Review” approach to reflect and appraise one or more methods that have been used to articulate, explore and assess impact pathways and research priorities. Subsequently, each chapter appraises experiences with the methods described, so as to communicate and share strengths and weaknesses encountered for each approach.

The process of developing the compendium will share lessons among centres, and fosters collective reflection within centres. As each chapter has multiple authors with different disciplinary backgrounds and responsibilities, each helps to clarify internal understanding. Through commentary and discussion among centres, lessons will be developed and shared at a broader CGIAR level.

These chapters will be followed by a “synthesis” chapter by an external expert who has had extensive real-world experience with improving priority assessment in an extensive array of research organizations, based on interaction with authors of the case chapters. This chapter will foster innovation by identifying methods relevant for policy oriented and natural resources management research, which now comprise the bulk of the CGIAR portfolio.

Virtual discussion forum

A virtual electronic discussion forum will be established, so as to build a “community of practice” within the CGIAR System. This forum will allow those implementing research planning processes to post questions and seek advice from experienced experts, and will facilitate the sharing of innovative ideas and methods for priority assessment. In addition, the forum will provide a venue for commentary on System level proposals and changes that affect the ability of System bodies to pursue systematic priority assessment.

Additional expertise needed to implement the project

As the project involves interaction among a large number of partners, enhanced (virtual) facilitation skills would allow it to proceed more effectively. Thus, facilitation training for the project leader may be beneficial for the project.

Innovation

Never before has such a breadth of real world experience with priority assessment been documented in a single resource. As a result, the compendium will offer a truly unique menu of

options and lessons for future research planning efforts by NARS institutes and the CGIAR. Moreover, the “synthesis” chapter will build on these experiences to identify methodological innovations appropriate to the CGIAR’s diversified portfolio and increasingly collaborative approach to research.

Replicability

The objective of the group’s activities is replication of collaborative priority assessment innovations in future research planning efforts. As a result, by providing a uniquely comprehensive resource on real world priority assessment efforts, it is anticipated that insights identified in the compendium would be considered in a wide array of future planning exercises over at least the next decade. The virtual discussion forum will allow for follow up and interaction with participating experts, and workshops/symposia are planned to disseminate and discuss findings with wider evaluation audiences in late 2008 at the American Evaluation Association and subsequent professional conferences.

Timeline

Draft “case” chapters prepared	1 June 2007
Draft “synthesis” chapter prepared	20 August 2007
Final version of chapters	30 October 2007
Printing and distribution	15 December 2007
Virtual discussion forum established	1 February 2008