



FCND Project Brief

Institutional Learning and Change: A CGIAR Initiative

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RATIONAL

Throughout the world, the pace of environmental, social and technological change is accelerating, and this in turn has major implications for the poor and their development prospects. Traditional transfer-of-technology approaches to agricultural research can no longer keep pace with the complex, diverse, risk-prone and dynamic realities of poor farmers. If agricultural research organizations are to be more successful in reducing poverty and increasing the sustainability of agricultural production systems, they must become less isolated, more interconnected and more responsive. In so doing, they must transform themselves into learning organizations, more in touch with field realities and better able to learn and to change. Recent research on the poverty alleviating impacts of technology associated with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) has identified institutional learning and change (ILAC) as a key area for intervention if research is to be more efficient and effective in serving the poor.

WHAT IS ILAC?

Problem-solving agricultural research, by its very nature, is a risky enterprise. Outputs and outcomes cannot be predicted with certainty. It involves a degree of trial and error in which not all—and probably not even a majority of—research paths achieve their intended goals and impact positively on the livelihoods of the poor. ILAC can be described as a “process of reflection, reframing and use of lessons learned during the research process that results in changed behavior and improved performance.” Within the framework of ILAC, a set of inter-

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ventions is emerging that seeks to strengthen performance and encourage new modes of professional behavior associated with continuous learning and change. The process is concerned with the rules, norms, and conventions that frame decision-making in agricultural research organizations. ILAC is driven by the premise that improved performance requires a spirit of deliberate and critical self-awareness among professionals and an open culture of reflective learning within organizations—a culture that encourages the identification and examination of less successful research paths to chart changes in objectives, strategies, and methods. In such an environment, errors and dead ends are recognized as opportunities for both individual and institutional learning that can lead to improved performance.

ENTRY POINTS FOR ILAC

Learning and change can occur at the level of systems, organizations, groups, teams and individuals. The ability of an organization and the people within it to learn and change is affected by the external operating environment, the internal environment, and organizational capacity. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches to ILAC are needed: top-down for support, legitimization, and protection, and bottom-up to allow for individual encounters and learning, augmented by monitoring and evaluation by field staff and farmers.

At the *system level*, operational paradigms may need to be examined and networks expanded or reconfigured. At the *organizational and program levels*, strategic planning exercises may be useful to explore new frontiers and to assess what revisions in strategy or tactics may be needed to identify and

correct less successful research paths and to address changes in the external environment. It may also be necessary to move away from formal hierarchies towards more decentralized decision-making and operations. At the *individual level*, both researchers and managers need to be more open to learning and change, since ultimately, institutional change can only occur through changes in behavior, attitudes, mindsets, relationships and activities, all of which depend on individual insights and decisions.

WAYS FORWARD: TOWARDS LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

Four complementary, synergistic approaches are proposed for fostering institutional learning and change and for developing learning organizations:

- *Developing a supportive external environment.* Donors can play a key role in encouraging and rewarding more explicit, transparent, and self-critical learning and change in research centers. The process can be further facilitated through networking and building alliances with others, both outside and inside the CGIAR.
- *Fostering a culture of innovation, learning and change.* This can be achieved by promoting values, beliefs, norms, and traditions that positively influence behavior and performance. Examples include seeking out new partners who offer diverse perspectives on development challenges, fostering open, enabling and nonhierarchical relationships, and supporting and facilitating critical review and reflection.
- *Reorienting management systems.* All elements of management should be reviewed, including decisionmaking processes, approaches to planning, recruitment, training, monitoring and evaluation, and reward systems: all should encourage and celebrate risk-taking, innovation, and learning.
- *Developing and enhancing awareness, knowledge, and individual capabilities.* This may include pilot initiatives to study innovation and learning within ongoing work, training to develop new process-oriented skills, and the provision of support services to allow CGIAR staff and partners to design and implement learning-oriented activities.

The proposed initiatives are exploratory, pilot activities, which include learning within existing projects, documenting innovation histories, and exploiting opportunities to learn from both successes and failures. Initially, the focus will be on providing the necessary support to enable CG centres to adopt an ILAC orientation in their work.

It is envisaged that successful ILAC initiatives will—indeed, must—connect with real work goals and processes. They will be focused on improving performance and will engage people who have the power to promote and protect ILAC initiatives. By balancing and combining action and learning with review and critical reflection, these initiatives will enhance and reward people’s capabilities, both individually and collectively.

A critical element of ILAC is reflection on the process of learning and change itself. This is a vital part of an iterative process of improvement: ILAC is not a predetermined blueprint, but an evolving approach with processes that themselves demand learning and change. Embracing the ILAC approach will help to develop a more transparent, productive, and efficient CG system that can more effectively contribute to the sustainable reduction of poverty.