

Rethinking Impact Evaluation: The Case of International Agricultural R&D

Jamie Watts, Nina Lilja,
Patti Kristjanson &
Doug Horton
(www.cgiar.org)

Topics

1. Background on international agricultural R&D
2. The evaluation tradition in agricultural R&D
3. Recent evolution of the agricultural R&D system
4. Evaluation challenges & responses
5. Current situation & issues
6. The “Rethinking Impact Workshop”
7. Some outstanding questions

Background

- CGIAR: International agricultural research system established in 1971.
- Founding premise: Ag. research is a powerful engine of agricultural & economic growth.
- “Green Revolution” significantly reduced food prices & increased real incomes.
- Strong donor support: 1970s & 1980s.
- “Core funding” peaked in 1985.

Impact Assessment Tradition in Agricultural R&D

- Strong tradition of economic IA in the USA, originating with economic assessment of research trials, then of innovations on farms.
- High returns to agric research was a key argument for World Bank support.
- “Ag. research evaluation” became synonymous with economic IA.
- Research evaluation became a sub-discipline within agricultural economics.
- More economic IAs done for agriculture than for any other type of R&D or of international development work.

Evolution of the CGIAR

- Expansion of system, coinciding with “donor fatigue,” leads to funding crisis in mid-1990s.
- Shift in donor priorities to the environment & poverty reduction leads to:
 - Expansion of CG agenda
 - Proliferation of donor-funded projects
 - New evaluation challenges:
 - More complex programs & targets
 - More programs to evaluate

... More Recent Evolution

- Complex “partnership programs” proliferate.
- System governance becomes increasingly complex.
- Difficulty of funding “core activities”
- Original organizing principles of system are questioned.
- Repeated calls for “system reform”
- Controversies:
 - Extent of consolidation & centralization
 - R&D paradigm: Research & transfer vs. innovation systems
 - Production of “IPGs” vs “development impact”
 - Re-focusing on breeding & genetics vs. NRM

Evaluation Challenges & Responses...

1. Demands for evidence of impact led to creation of “IA & Evaluation Group” in 1995.
Program evaluators are brought in, but have little “impact.”
2. Dependence on donor projects led to proliferation of donor evaluations.
3. Demands for improved Center management (?) led to new “PM System” in 2004.
4. Demands for IA&E increase, but Center capacity erodes.

... Evaluation Challenges & Responses

5. Resources at Centers for IA&E shift from program- to accountability-oriented work.
6. New programs develop “in-house” E capacity.
7. “*Strategic guidelines*” for ex-post IA (2008) based on agric. economic methods apply to $< 1/2$ current R&D portfolio.
8. Current “IE mania” increases demands for more & better economic IA!
9. Current restructuring proposal calls for a central CG Board & an independent evaluation unit.

“Rethinking Impact Workshop”

- 60 participants
 - 1/2 = ‘partners’
 - Minority = ‘evaluators’)
- Diverse types of E / “IA”, mostly related to program improvement.
- ‘Impact’ issues:
 - Complexity
 - Disappearing distinction between R and D
 - Importance of “boundary-spanning”
 - Engagement of diverse stakeholders
- ‘Evaluation’ issues
 - Moving beyond ‘traditional IA’
 - Evaluation capacity development

Some Personal Reflections

- 2 distinct evaluation systems have emerged:
 - Formal / institutional system
 - Informal, program-based system
- Formal system conforms with Leeuw's (2008) propositions:
 - Serves mainly to provide “routine info” & to legitimize activities.
 - Tends to expand & breed new sub-systems.
- Distinct “epistemic communities” have emerged.
(Informal system does not do “*real IA*”)
- The “formal” system discourages “informal” evaluation.

Outstanding Questions

- Can the formal system become more useful for learning & program improvement?
- How could the 2 systems co-exist more peacefully?
- How to prepare more effective policies for both:
 - IA & accountability-focused evaluation?
 - Process and outcome evaluation?
- Can “soft science” approaches & methods gain legitimacy in a “Hard Science” organization?
- How can a R&D “paradigm shift” be encouraged?
- Can needed resources be marshaled / unleashed for useful evaluation at both Center & System levels?