

The Institutional Learning and Change Initiative: An Introduction

At a time of rapid environmental, social and technological change, the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative promotes critical reflection and improved ways of working within the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The goal is to enhance the contribution of agricultural research to sustainable poverty reduction. The ILAC Initiative draws on the expanding body of knowledge encompassing complex adaptive systems, innovation processes, organizational learning and program evaluation, and promotes the examination of research paradigms, institutional norms, management practices and professional behaviours. The Initiative aims to improve agricultural research and development efforts in four key areas: a) developing the capacity of researchers and managers to lead their own learning and change efforts; b) promoting the development of

"To be serious about poverty, the agricultural research and development community has to be serious about institutional learning and change."

Chambers, 2003

management systems and practices that support continuous learning and change; c) supporting an organizational culture of learning and change; and d) fostering donor and system-level support for learning and change initiatives in CGIAR centres and programs. This Brief outlines the rationale for ILAC within the CGIAR, highlights the main features of the Initiative and briefly describes the expected results and benefits for the CGIAR.

Why ILAC? Why now?

The accelerating pace of environmental, social and technological change throughout the world has major implications for the poor and their development prospects (Watts et al., 2003).

"No institution, however successful, can base its future purely on past performance. Progress and relevance come from building on past strengths and grappling with past weaknesses."

CGIAR System Review Secretariat, 1998

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, better linked to other actors in innovation systems and more responsive to the changing circumstances of the poor (Hall et al., 2001). The process requires organizations to become better acquainted 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)

"Not all paths of scientific enquiry are fully successful, and indeed the number of dead ends is probably greater than the number of successes... 'Failed' experiments are often the most useful, providing the greatest opportunities for learning."

Matlon, 2003

as a key area for intervention if research is to be more efficient and effective in meeting the needs of the poor.

What is ILAC?

Problem-solving agricultural research, by its very nature, is a risky enterprise. It involves a degree of trial and error in which only a small proportion of the research projects initiated actually achieve their goals and contribute significantly to reducing poverty. ILAC is a process that can change behaviour and improve performance by drawing lessons from the research process and using

"Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and enquire into it on the organization's behalf."

Argyris and Schön, 1996

them to improve future work. The ILAC framework encompasses a set of emerging interventions that will strengthen performance by encouraging new modes of professional behaviour associated with continuous learning and change. ILAC is concerned with the rules, norms and conventions that frame decision making in agricultural research organizations. The Initiative 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 both successful and less successful research paths. In such an environment, 'innovation dead ends' are not recognized as failures but as opportunities for individual and institutional learning that can direct changes in objectives, strategies and methods leading to improved performance (Table 1).

Table I. Frameworks for development practice: Shifts and expanded options

	From	Expanded to include
Orientation and power	Top down	Bottom up
Modes/approaches	Standardized Linear Reductionist	Diverse Complex Systems
Conditions	Controlled Stable Predictable	Uncontrolled/uncontrollable Dynamic Unpredictable
Learning	Ex-post	Continuous
Roles	Teacher Supervisor External evaluator	Facilitator Coach Evaluation facilitator
Outcomes	Products and infrastructure	Processes and capability
Valued behaviours	Rigorous/objective	Critical self-reflection
Main purpose of evaluation	Accountability and control	Learning and improvement
Accountability to	Donors and peers	All stakeholders, especially the poor
Treatment of failure	Buried or punished	Valued as a learning opportunity

Entry points for ILAC

Learning and change can occur at various levels. Within the CGIAR, they can occur at the level of the system, centres, programs, teams and individuals. The ability of a CGIAR centre and the people within it to learn and change is affected by the external operating environment (e.g. the signals received from donors and the CGIAR Science Council), the internal environment or culture and the knowledge and skills of its researchers and managers. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches to ILAC are needed: top down for support and legitimization and bottom up to foster individual and group learning and knowledge sharing.

At the system level, broad paradigms may need to be examined and revised as well as the performance measures and incentives that reflect them. At the organizational and program levels, mechanisms may be needed to promote continuous learning from experience and re-adjustment of plans and operating procedures in response to changing conditions and accumulated experience. It may be necessary to move away from formal hierarchies towards more decentralized decision making and operations. At the individual level, researchers and managers may need to become more open to learning and change and may need to acquire new skills for such things as negotiation and facilitation within complex partnerships.

Ways forward: Towards learning organizations

Recent research and experience with capacity development, organizational learning and innovation (Horton et al., 2003; Senge et al., 1999; von Krogh et al., 2000) suggests four complementary, synergistic approaches for fostering ILAC:

- Developing a supportive external environment. Donors can play a key role in encouraging and rewarding transparent and self-critical learning and change in research centres. The process can be further facilitated through networking and building alliances within and outside the CGIAR.
- Fostering a culture of innovation, learning and change. This can be achieved by promoting values, beliefs, norms and traditions that have a positive effect on behaviour and performance.

- Reorienting management systems. Many aspects of management can influence the extent to which individuals and teams will take risks, learn from experience and share their knowledge. The approaches used for planning, evaluation, staff recruitment/promotion and rewarding performance can promote or discourage learning and change.
- Developing knowledge, skills, creativity and motivation. Ultimately, institutional change can only occur when there is a change in professional behaviours, attitudes and relationships, all of which depend on the motivation, knowledge, skills and creativity of individuals.

What is the ILAC Initiative?

The ILAC Initiative involves researchers and managers from several CGIAR centres and inter-centre programs. It is hosted by the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) and supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ). The donors view the Initiative as one component of a CGIAR reform agenda, which will lead to a more open, dynamic and effective system characterized by continuous learning, institutional adjustment and performance improvement.

The Initiative was instigated to address the limitations of conventional impact assessment within the CGIAR, which assumed: a) there is a direct causal link between research and impact; b) that this link dominates other variables; and c) that inputs and impacts can be accurately measured or predicted (Ekboir, 2003). Recent assessments of CGIAR impact on poverty alleviation have questioned these assumptions and broken new ground by examining poverty rather than economic impact and by exploring the wider livelihood context of the poor. The studies

“In a complex adaptive system, several variables and chance interact to produce the observed results, making it impossible to assign causality to just one variable.”

Ekboir, 2003

highlight the complexity of rural livelihoods and show how impact is not only linked with the technology produced, but also with the way the research is carried out and with the institutions that guide research and technology development (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004).

At a time of significant change within the CGIAR system, the ILAC Initiative promotes critical reflection and analysis at multiple levels. It draws on the expanding body of knowledge encompassing complex adaptive systems, innovation processes, organizational learning and program evaluation, and promotes examination of research paradigms, institutional norms, management practices and professional behaviours.

“To increase the impact of agricultural research on poverty, research organizations need to embrace a culture of institutional learning and change.”

Meinzen-Dick et al., 2004

The Initiative hopes to engage the donor community in establishing new criteria for rewarding adaptive learning within the CGIAR centres and their partners. It offers a new perspective for understanding how innovations occur in complex systems. And it provides management approaches that include participatory approaches for planning and evaluation and for fostering dialogue and collaboration in partnerships. Its overall purpose is to help CGIAR centres and programs to learn faster from their successes and failures and to adjust their strategies and approaches to changing circumstances.

What is the ILAC Initiative doing?

Piloting ILAC research and evaluation methods: The ILAC Initiative is centred on a set of pilot projects that will generate principles, insights and lessons for strengthening learning and innovation within the CGIAR and other agricultural research organizations. Four projects are currently operating. An International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) team is developing and analysing innovation histories as a tool to improve innovative performance (see Brief 5). A team from the International Network for the Improvement of Banana and Plantain (INIBAP) and IPGRI is exploring approaches for complementing traditional impact assessment with institutional analysis as a way to improve strategies and impact. The International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) is working to draw lessons from institutional histories of watershed research carried out in recent decades. Finally, the International Centre for the Improvement of Maize and Wheat (CIMMYT) is developing a new framework for impact assessment focused on individuals, systems, livelihoods and poverty reduction.

“The most serious mistakes are not being made as a result of wrong answers. The truly dangerous thing is asking the wrong question.”

Drucker, 1971

Spreading the word about innovative approaches: Publications include a special issue of the international journal *Agricultural Systems*, which focuses on innovative approaches to evaluation (Horton and Mackay, 2003). This series of ILAC Briefs provide succinct information on approaches and experiences that will help researchers and managers who wish to introduce or mainstream ILAC within their organizations. Reports on ILAC pilot projects and research studies will document methods and results in greater detail. A website is also being developed.

Technical support and mentoring: The Initiative is providing technical support, coaching and mentoring to all interested CGIAR centres. Table 2 gives examples of the types of support that have been provided, usually through cost-sharing arrangements.

Developing and evolving management approaches: The Initiative is developing options for reorienting human resources management, planning and evaluation systems to promote learning and change. For example, a study of human resources management, organizational learning and knowledge sharing in collaboration with the Knowledge Sharing Project of the Information and Communications Technologies–Knowledge Management (ICT–KM) Program (see Brief 11).

Strengthening facilitation skills: Facilitating participatory decision making is a core skill in a learning organization. In 2005, ILAC and the Knowledge Sharing Project co-sponsored two facilitation training courses for a total of 40 scientists and managers.

Fostering an evolving ILAC community: An ILAC community of practice is being established to support the many individuals (including scientists, evaluation and impact assessment specialists and managers within the CGIAR and its partners) who are interested in adopting ILAC approaches.

Anticipated results

The ILAC Initiative is expected to have a number of short-term benefits. New capacities are being developed for facilitating participatory decision making in dynamic partnerships and for planning and carrying out more effective research within complex and dynamic innovation systems involving multiple partners. As ILAC becomes mainstreamed, management approaches (particularly for planning, priority setting, evaluation and personnel management) are expected to change in ways that en-

Table 2. Technical support provided by the ILAC Initiative

Centre/organization supported	Type of support
International Potato Center (CIP)	Using learning-oriented evaluation approaches in the Papa Andina Network
CGIAR Systems Office and Executive Committee	Participating in the design of the CGIAR performance measurement system
OXFAM–UK	Developing a regional learning strategy for Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean
Global Crop Diversity Trust	Designing an integrated monitoring and evaluation system
International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) ‘Learning to Innovate’ Group	Using ‘appreciative inquiry’ in a planning workshop
World Agroforestry Centre	Planning an assessment of capacity development work in Uganda

“The willingness to learn from failures as well as successes is a key component of effective agricultural research for development.”
Task Force on Impact Assessment and Evaluation, European Initiative for Agricultural Research for Development, 2003

courage and reward continuous learning, innovation and performance improvement. The ILAC Initiative will increase awareness among donors of the role of the CGIAR within broader innovation systems. This should lead to greater support from donors for learning and change initiatives within the CGIAR and for research that is planned and conducted in a way that contributes to innovation processes. It should also encourage CGIAR planning and performance assessment systems to recognize and reward organizational learning and innovation. Involvement in the ILAC Initiative will spread awareness among CGIAR researchers and managers of the value of organizational learning and institutional change and will promote a shift in values in favour of more creative approaches for organizing and managing research with partners.

Further reading

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Available Briefs

1. The ILAC Initiative
2. Innovation systems
3. Learning-oriented evaluation
4. Collaborative agreements
5. Innovation histories
6. Appreciative inquiry
7. Outcome mapping
8. Learning alliances
9. The Sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Program
10. Making the most of meetings
11. Human resources management



The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative is hosted by IPGRI, a member of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
www.cgiar-ilac.org

The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative seeks to improve the relevance and effectiveness of agricultural research programs in contributing to sustainable poverty reduction. Hosted by the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), the ILAC Initiative is supported by The Rockefeller Foundation, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, and works with research centres and programs affiliated with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). ILAC Briefs are issued to stimulate dialogue and disseminate ideas and experiences that researchers and managers can put to use in strengthening organizational learning and performance improvement in their own work. An ILAC Brief may introduce a concept, approach or tool; it may summarize results of a study; or it may highlight results of a recent event.