

EVALUATION BRIEF

SYNTHESIS AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM 15 CRP EVALUATIONS

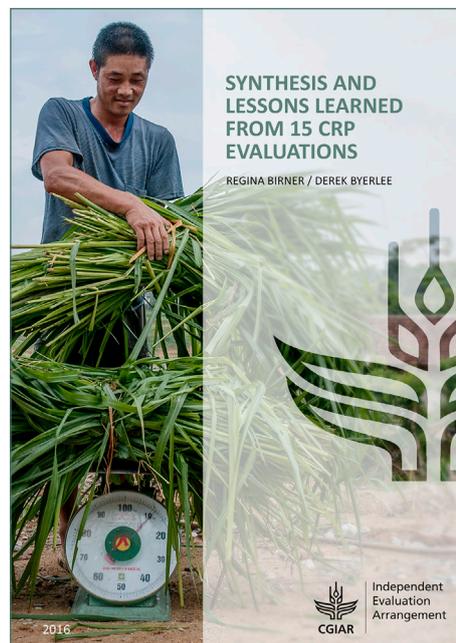
BY REGINA BIRNER AND DEREK BYERLEE



Independent
Evaluation
Arrangement

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The CGIAR is a global partnership that was created in 1971 and now comprises 15 international research Centers engaged in development-oriented research on agriculture and natural resources. Starting in 2008, the CGIAR underwent a major reform that aimed to improve coordination across the CGIAR Centers, make the research agenda more demand-driven, and strengthen the development impact of CGIAR research. A central element of the reform was the creation of 15 CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs), each of which is jointly managed by several CGIAR Centers, often with external partners. The creation of the CRPs, which started in 2011, was probably the most far-reaching and ambitious reform effort undertaken since the establishment of the CGIAR, because the CRPs were designed to integrate virtually the entire research portfolio of all Centers within a common strategic framework for the CGIAR System.



Between 2013 and early 2016, the Independent Evaluation Arrangement (IEA) of the CGIAR carried evaluations of ten CRPs and supported the evaluations of the five remaining CRPs that were commissioned by the CRPs themselves. Subsequently, IEA conducted a “Synthesis Review of Lessons Learned of the 15 CRP Evaluations” with the purpose of identifying the main patterns emerging from the evaluations and to derive lessons learned. This Synthesis is not meant to be a comprehensive meta-analysis of the 15 CRP evaluations, but rather focuses on selected topics that are considered most important to informing the next phase of the CRPs.

APPROACH AND METHODS

The Synthesis is based on the evaluation reports of the 15 CRPs. After an initial screening of the reports, the Synthesis team identified, in consultation with IEA, the topics to be covered. The team then reviewed each CRP evaluation report, extracted the relevant findings for each topic and compiled them into a data base that formed the basis for the synthesis. Some primary data collected for the evaluations, such as researcher surveys, were also used. In addition, the team consulted strategic documents and guidelines produced at CGIAR level, earlier evaluations of the CGIAR and other relevant studies. A draft of the Synthesis was reviewed by the leaders of the CRP evaluation teams and by the management of the CRPs and CGIAR Centers.

MAIN FINDINGS AND LESSONS LEARNED

RELEVANCE AND PRIORITY SETTING

The CRPs aimed to be more strategic and results-oriented than earlier approaches used in the CGIAR. Priorities are now to be identified based on the formulation of Intermediate Development Outcomes

(IDOs), which are expected to contribute to the overarching System-Level Outcomes identified in the CGIAR's Strategy and Results Framework. The IDOs are to be derived from "Theories of Change" (ToCs), which requires researchers to identify the causal mechanisms by which change is expected to occur along an impact pathway.

The Synthesis showed that the new approach has indeed the potential to increase the relevance of CGIAR research. However, identifying IDOs based on ToCs does not replace priority setting, but only provide a framework. This approach still needs to be combined with quantitative and qualitative methods of priority setting to identify how funding is best allocated across and within the CRPs, taking into account aspects such as the comparative advantage of the CGIAR, potential contribution to the IDOs, and the likelihood of success. Some CRPs applied well established methods of priority setting and others developed promising new methods of participatory priority setting. In most cases, however, priorities were derived from legacy research inherited by the CRPs from the pre-reform period and by availability of funds for specific research activities. Overall, the Synthesis Review found that substantially more emphasis on priority setting is required, both at the System and the CRP levels, if the CGIAR wants to realize its own goal to be at forefront on how the international community should allocate resources for international agricultural research.

QUALITY OF SCIENCE

The evaluations show that the CRPs are research programs where some world-class agricultural research is being conducted with a focus on the CGIAR's overarching goals. Generally, the CRPs were found to be able to produce quality of science at a level that can be expected from international agricultural research organizations. Still, there is considerable variation in quality of science within and across CRPs, which is reflected in differences in the quality of research inputs, research management processes and research outputs. This variation in research quality indicates that the CRPs have, so far, only been partly successful in using the potential of the new matrix management structure for combining the strengths of the participating Centers to boost the overall quality of science. CRPs may gain from harmonizing processes of quality control and performance management of research staff across Centers since they maintain the authority for these processes. The need for a stronger culture of data sharing across Centers also emerges from the evaluations. Moreover, as the publication analyses conducted by the evaluations clearly show, collaboration with Advanced Research Institutions (ARIs) is essential for the CRPs to be able to stay at the research frontier in an increasingly competitive environment.

With regard to the disciplinary mix, the Synthesis suggests that several CRPs would benefit from a better integration of social science research, and the CRPs overall would benefit from integrating a wider range of social sciences beyond economics in their disciplinary portfolio. As the evaluations also indicate, CRPs that rely on expensive research infrastructure to be able to conduct disciplinary research of high quality have largely benefitted from past investments of the Centers. The evaluations stress the urgent need to identify how sufficient investment in research infrastructure to ensure future quality of science can be ensured under the CRP funding system.

OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The Synthesis found that the introduction of the ToC concept has led to a stronger results orientation of the CGIAR. However, more effort is required to adapt the ToC concept, which was originally designed for development projects, to the specific requirements of complex global research programs. The CRPs could make better use of their own research expertise to develop better ToCs, but this will require that CRP staff embraces the concept as part of their research endeavor, rather than considering it as just

another requirement to be fulfilled to access funding. These lessons also apply to current efforts to develop a Results-Based Management (RBM) System using the ToC/IDO concept. The RBM System needs to be based on more realistic assumptions regarding attribution of outcomes to research effort, the number and type of indicators that can be credibly be monitored, and the frequency with which they can be monitored.

The Synthesis found that the evaluations generally rated the quality of impact assessments favorably although often noting considerable variability. Methodological rigor was found to be increased where panel data sets and novel techniques such as Randomized Controlled Trials are employed. Although impact evidence is incomplete, the available studies point to continuing impacts of the CGIAR system. Still, the Synthesis indicates that a systematic and comprehensive approach to Impact Assessment remains a work in progress. Impact Assessment should be an ongoing activity that provides broad coverage of the major CRP research products and their impact with regard to Intermediate and System-Level Development Outcomes at regular intervals of 5-10 years, supported by the allocation of a certain percentage of funds to Impact Assessment.

GENDER

The Synthesis found that a range of activities and processes have been adopted throughout the CRPs to promote gender mainstreaming. The evaluations indicate that the enabling environment for gender research has been improved throughout the CRPs. Progress is also noted in mainstreaming gender in actual research activities, but more efforts are necessary to not only collect gender-disaggregated data but also to analyse and use them, and to complement quantitative with qualitative research approaches. This would allow the CGIAR to bring gender into the mainstream of different branches of literature on agricultural development. The evaluations also indicate that more emphasis should be placed on addressing gender in the workplace as required by the CGIAR Gender Strategy.

PARTNERSHIPS AND CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT

The CRPs were found to have a large number of partners, with up to 900 for a single CRP. National research organizations remain the most important type of partners for almost all CRPs, and they are also the focus of most capacity development activities. The Synthesis indicates that CRPs will benefit from developing explicit partnership strategies as well as capacity development strategies, linked to the ToCs in order to provide criteria for selecting partners and for prioritizing capacity development activities. The quality of partnerships with research partners in the “South” could be improved by engaging them more fully in the entire research process from the design stage and by addressing the power imbalances that may result from their role as subcontractors for much of the CRP research. Maintaining and strengthening long-standing partnerships with ARIs was found to be essential to realizing CRP objectives. CRPs can also benefit from developing partnerships with ARIs for relatively new areas in the CRP portfolio. In view of the rising importance of private sector organizations as partners of the CRPs, it seems essential to develop policies for private sector engagement which aim to strengthen impact pathways while managing reputational risks.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT

The governance structures of CRPs were evolving during the evaluation period. All CRPs have moved to a single governance body that is supposed to have oversight as well as advisory functions. There is a need to monitor whether this new governance structure will benefit the CRPs more than previous arrangements, which often included a steering committee and a separate scientific advisory committee. The evaluations also indicate that in most cases, CRP management could be strengthened by allocating more

authority to the CRP Directors and by improving the systems that provide management information on the CRPs.

FUNDING

The CGIAR Reform introduced three funding windows for the CRPs: Window 1 (W1) funds that can be allocated across CRPs, Window 2 (W2) funds that are allocated to specific CRPs, and Window 3 (W3) funds that are allocated to specific Centers. In the last part of the evaluation period, the share of W1/W2 funds of total expenditure dropped considerably. Moreover, almost all the evaluations highlighted the problems faced by the CRPs due to the uncertainty of W1/W2 funds from year to year and even within years. Based on evaluation findings and plausible assumptions, the Synthesis suggests that a minimum share of W1/W2 funds in a CRP budget should be in the range of 30-35% if W1/W2 funds are to provide sufficient leverage to implement an integrative and collaborative research program across Centers. It also emerges from the evaluations that CRPs should move away from allocating W1/W2 funds according to a formula and establish competitive transparent mechanisms to allocate these funds to the highest priorities and the best science.

VALUE ADDED

The evaluation reports and the researcher surveys broadly concluded that the CRPs have added value, even though there are variation across CRPs. Examples of value added include an emerging results culture, benefits from new partnerships, increased exchange of knowledge and research products, synergies generated by combining complementary assets from different participating Centers and increased efficiency achieved by using common protocols and tools. These benefits have to be balanced against increased transactions costs of participating in CRPs, especially administrative and reporting costs. The evaluations are uniformly in agreement that the potential value added of the CRPs is much higher than what has been realized to date. A common finding is that two to four years is only sufficient to lay the basis for strong CRP partnerships across Centers and that several more years are needed to continue to learn from experience and build trust in order to develop truly integrated programs.

CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account the challenges inherent in introducing a system of matrix management across 15 legally independent Centers, the Synthesis concludes that the creation of the CRPs can be considered as a valuable reform approach, especially if funding flexibility and stability can be regained. The CRP evaluations provide evidence of a substantial willingness to collaborate at all levels, from the leadership of the CRPs and the Centers to the scientists on the ground. However, the incentives to collaborate in a major reform effort of the CGIAR were strong at the beginning of the reform, where agriculture had just come back to the center stage of international development after decades of neglect. To maintain the reform momentum, it is important to maintain strong incentives for collaboration, including CRP funding and streamlined management processes, if the reform goal of the “CGIAR functioning as one institution” is to be achieved.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Visit the IEA website to access the full Synthesis with Annexes as well as other information (team profiles, TORs, Inception Report):

<http://iea.cgiar.org/evaluation/synthesis-and-lessons-learned-crp-evaluations>