

Farmer First Revisited: Some Reflections on the Future of the CGIAR

An Informal Note to the CGIAR Independent Review Team

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Lessons from Farmer First Revisited

This short note is an attempt to compile some of the perspectives of the participants at the Farmer First Revisited conference held at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK, in December 2007 (<http://www.farmer-first.org/>). Some 80 participants from around world gathered to reflect on the achievements and challenges of farmer-led research and development over 20 years since the first Farmer First conference held in 1987.

At least 17 participants were current or affiliated staff of CGIAR centres; many others had worked with the CG system over the years. The future of the CGIAR was very much at the heart of the discussions, and was central to one of the main working group sessions. What follows has been compiled by the workshop organisers and is, as a result, necessarily partial and incomplete, but it does attempt to give a flavour of what were quite heated and passionate discussions.

There was general agreement (if not completely universal) that an international system for agricultural research is an essential contributor to current and future global development challenges. The CGIAR has made many important contributions, including to farmer participatory research efforts, but, in many people's view, the CG is punching well below its weight, despite recent injections of new funds. This was seen as both a disappointment and a challenge, and why offering a few thoughts to the Independent Review team is very opportune.

In her keynote presentation, Jacqueline Ashby (formerly of CIAT now of CIP and with many years of experience of the CG system) summed up some of the concerns with the way farmer participatory research (FPR) had gone within the CGIAR:

Increasingly, FPR became perceived as a way to convince farmers (and donors) that the existing supply of agricultural R&D was on track to benefit the poor. The proliferation of FPR occurred in tandem with a shift away from unrestricted to project-based funding for agricultural R&D, on which research programs came increasingly to depend. Program directors used the —farmer participatory label as a sales pitch to compete successfully for development (i.e. non-research) project funding. This provoked a deep-seated resentment of FPR among many scientists who perceived that conventional research programs were being drained of resources that were being reallocated to participatory (so-called) — research that in many instances involved no research and was of dubious value to the poor. In practice, the term — farmer participation was captured by a large group of

protagonists whose chief need was to demonstrate adoption of technologies seen to be —on-the-shelf and who hoped FPR would persuade farmers of their desirability..... As a result, the notion of conducting research with farmers became steadily diluted. A hybrid approach to FPR was popularized, especially at senior management levels in Boards of Trustees and among Directors-General, where fund-raising was of paramount concern, which involved farmers in validating the supply of technology coming out of the established, pipeline-style of research. This had the bonus of enabling farmers, on occasion, to provide feedback to research, but avoided altering the established balance of power in which science bureaucracies set research objectives and define how research processes are conducted. http://www.future-agricultures.org/farmerfirst/files/D1_Ashby.pdf

Specific Reflections

Of the range of issues raised in conference discussions, the following were mentioned regularly in different ways:

- **Upstream vs. Downstream.** The move ‘upstream’ - in line with the Science Council priorities for 2005-15 - has, in many peoples’ view, created an unhealthy separation of ‘pure’ or ‘basic’ science – often dominated by laboratory-based molecular biological approaches – from the more applied agricultural sciences. This has resulted in users (notably farmers) becoming increasingly distant from research activities, with less input into priority setting, testing and adaptation etc. Better science, with greater uptake, always results from user engagement upstream, as well as downstream, but the CGIAR seems increasingly poor at facilitating upstream engagement. Linking farmers to labs – and not just research station fields – requires some major thought, both in terms of new practices and protocols, but also in the wider governance of science and technology in the CGIAR. Interesting experiences exist – within and beyond the CGIAR – which could be usefully drawn upon to create new innovation networks which connect farmers and lab scientists.
- **Software vs. Hardware.** The assumption that CGIAR only deals with ‘international public goods’ assumes that universal, spill-over results are all that matter. While these are essential, many of the most significant impacts on poverty reduction and improved livelihoods result from highly context-specific engagements over extended periods, dealing with the ‘software’ of institutions and social processes, as well as the technology ‘hardware’ (as demonstrated in the CGIAR’s own evaluation work – see the recent book by Adato and Meinzen-Dick¹ based on the earlier evaluation of CG impacts).
- **Capacity of the National Agricultural Research and Extension Systems.** The assumption that the NARES must deal with local level adaptation of generic results and technological ‘magic bullets’ produced by the CGIAR assumes a very linear approach to innovation and technology transfer. This approach, modelled on the successes of the 1960-70s Green Revolution, has been shown to work in relatively few situations. The lack of capacity of many NARES, particularly in Africa following structural adjustment, has to be acknowledged, with the CGIAR taking on a more active role in facilitating

¹ Adato, M., and Meinzen-Dick, R., eds. (2007) *Agricultural Research, Livelihoods and Poverty*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

processes of innovation. This has important implications for the future role of the CGIAR in supporting a new African Green Revolution, in alliance with new partners such as AGRA and new funders such as the Gates Foundation.

- **Innovation in Innovation Systems.** A more sophisticated, integrated approach to innovation systems is required that sees the CG centres as part of highly context-specific innovation systems, where particular economic, social, cultural and political processes influence how research is done and how research influences innovation. This has (seemingly rather reluctantly) been accepted as part of the sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Programme, which therefore offers the potential for testing and exploring a new set of relationships and processes, if these are not too constrained by institutional inertia and existing biases within the CG system and other partners.
- **Social Science Capacity.** A broader innovation systems approach which puts farmers – alongside other technology beneficiaries – first requires a wider set of skills than is often available in CG Centres. The decline in social science capacity (beyond economics) in the CG system has been tangible, and there remain very few political scientists, psychologists, social anthropologists and sociologists, for example, on full-time, core-funded posts. Much social science work – some of it of very high quality – occurs in an ad hoc way through short-duration project funds and outside core commitments. This results in a lack of professional advancement and inadequate institutionalisation. This has been one of the major failings of the CGIAR as it attempted to embrace participatory, farmer-oriented approaches. This has only got worse with the adoption of the Challenge Programme model, it was argued. While welcoming cross-Centre collaboration and problem-focused research, Ashby argued that “at a strategic level, [CGIAR Challenge Programmes] have relegated interaction with farmers to the late stages of delivery of near-finished research products. The idea of doing research with farmers has gradually dwindled to a few, marginalized activities nursed by individuals committed to the concept, but lacking hard-core, institutional support”.
- **Institutional Learning and Change.** CGIAR impacts and outcomes are often very narrowly defined when based on conventional impact assessment methodologies. While such approaches have an important role, they may distract from wider lesson learning and reflexivity if used as the sole metric for assessment. A broadening of impact assessment is required to encompass participatory learning approaches. Such approaches have been advocated by the ILAC (Institutional Learning and Change) group of the CGIAR, but, as yet, not widely adopted. Such approaches would, it was argued at the conference, enhance the capacities of the Science Council and the wider network of CGIAR DGs, as well as specific programmes. A range of examples were discussed at the conference that combined learning approaches with both qualitative and quantitative participatory impact assessment (for example – the approaches developed in Ethiopia to participatory impact assessment and participatory epidemiology described by Dawit Abebe and Andy Catley). Embedding such approaches in scientific organisations – such as the CGIAR or NARES – was seen to involve a number of practical and organisational challenges, but the demonstrable results – on improved research focus and outcomes, on policy change and on wider poverty reduction and sustainability goals – were tangible and exciting.

- **Personal and Professional Rewards and Incentives.** Fundamental issues of personal and professional behaviour lie at the heart of many issues, preventing the wider success and impact of the CGIAR. Encouraging greater reflexivity and learning in research and development, admitting mistakes and learning from them, and accepting that not all innovations will always work out are all important. But to encourage such behaviours will require some major shifts in the way professional incentive structures, organisational hierarchies and reward systems operate within the CGIAR. Currently, it was suggested, much interesting, exciting and innovative work in CGIAR occurs at the margins, very often hidden - operating through informal, below-the-radar arrangements, such as the way participatory plant breeding emerged. Such activities need to be acknowledged, appreciated and brought centre stage much earlier and given organisational support and recognition.
- **Governance of the CGIAR.** Participants at the conference felt that governance of the CGIAR needs to move beyond out-dated expert-driven, elitist structures and processes to ones which are more representative and inclusive of the users of CGIAR products. This is of course an old debate, but one, it was felt, where action rather than continued obfuscation was needed. Changes must include giving farmers' organisations and their representatives a much more concrete role within the governance system of the CGIAR, and a central role in core decision-making and strategic bodies such as the Science Council. The current membership of the Science Council, for example, means that the legitimacy of the priority setting and strategic direction can be challenged. This undermines the capacity of the system to deliver genuinely global public goods.

Conclusions

In sum, the CGIAR is an essential part of the global commitment to poverty reduction and development, but it is not achieving its goals at present and needs some major shifts in both overall policy and organisational practice. Approaches to farmer participatory research developed over the past 20 years have an important role to play, but debates about farmer involvement in research must go beyond the elaboration of methods and techniques to addressing much more fundamental issues – of personal and professional behaviour, of power and politics and of governance and organisational style. The CGIAR is currently constrained from meeting its wider goals and needs some substantial help in moving forward. The good news is that much of the knowledge, experience and capacity exist already within the CG network of centres and partners, so these ambitious aims can be relatively easily realised, if the will, impetus and leadership is there. Without this, the CGIAR will miss a key opportunity of revitalising agricultural development globally, one that is unlikely to return again soon.

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