

Facilitation Skills for Participatory Decision-Making Workshop Report, January 2007

Summary

The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative co-sponsored two training courses aiming to build essential skills for facilitating group decision-making among CGIAR managers and team leaders. This report presents summary results of a participant evaluation in both events.



ILAC Facilitation Workshop, 18-21 July 2006 – ILRI

The first workshop took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (18-21 July 2006) in partnership with ILRI. The second workshop was in El Batan, Mexico (5-8 September 2006) in partnership with CIMMYT.

The specific objectives of the course were to build skills and knowledge in the following areas:

- Facilitation of meetings in order to make them more effective
- Managing conflict and disagreement
- Building consensus
- Facilitating virtual teams

The events were attended by 39 professionals (57% Top and Middle-level Managers, 38% Senior Research Scientists, and 5% Programme Support staff) from 10 CGIAR centers and system-wide programs.



ILAC Facilitation Workshop, 5-8 September 2006 – CIMMYT

In general, the participants indicated that they were very satisfied with the skills and knowledge gained, with the methodology and with the knowledgeable trainer. Participants also indicated that there is a need to practice the skills gained and some felt they may need further assistance with situation that may occur when facilitating a meeting. They pointed out that the discussion group (DGroup) is an opportunity to share experiences and ask for assistance on suitable techniques for facilitation.

Both training courses on facilitating participatory decision making have been taught by Dr. Sam Kaner, a world leader on consensus decision-making and senior author of the book, *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*.

Introduction

Practice and acceptance of facilitation has increased in the past 10 years because professionals understood that if individuals do not make decision collaboratively and with ownership of the solutions to the problems, implementation often fails and project goals are not achieved.

CGIAR staff, like many other professionals, is required to facilitate meetings and interactions among different partners as part of their day to day routine. In order to perform such task several skills are needed, such as ability to listen openly and actively, group dynamics, respect for individuals points of view, flexibility and tolerance. In an attempt to provide such skills and contribute to a greater impact of CGIAR activities, ILAC coordinated a staff development course in two different locations, but with similar target groups.

The first workshop took place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (18-21 July 2006) in partnership with ILRI. The second workshop was in El Batan, Mexico (5-8 September 2006) in partnership with CIMMYT.

The events were attended by 39 professionals (20% female, 57% Top and Middle-level Managers, 38% Senior Research Scientists, and 5% Programme Support staff) from 10 CGIAR centers and system-wide programs.

Overall, the workshop aimed to provide the participants with knowledge, attitudes and skills to:

- Facilitate meetings in order to make them more effective
- Manage conflict and disagreement
- Build consensus
- Facilitate virtual teams

In order to achieve the objectives above, the workshop was structured by topics and sessions, as following:

Day One – facilitator fundamentals: facilitative listening, suspending judgment and facilitation stand-up skills;

Day Two – group dynamics: process management, difficult dynamics and building consensus;

Day Three – leading meetings: playing two roles, clarifying outcomes and realistic agendas;

Day Four – sustainable agreements: building consensus, reaching closure and site-based application

During four-day of the workshop, the trainer presented information and conducted group exercises designed to allow the participants to learn new techniques to facilitate meetings, and solve conflicts.

The workshop was designed to provide an interactive learning environment where brief explanations were followed by interactive exercises that contributed to the sharing of participants' experiences. It was a learner-centered approach involving active experience

followed by a process of reviewing, reflecting, and applying what had been learned through the experience. This approach encouraged communication and group work.

The following sections of this report present the methodology and results from a virtual evaluation carried out between 3 and 4 months after the end of the courses.

Evaluation Methodology

The course participants were asked to evaluate several aspects of the course through an online survey. A web-based service, called *Survey Monkey*¹, was used to administer a custom-made survey that included 17 questions. Seven of these required a rating and ten were open ended questions allowing an essay response. The survey had an average response rate of 70%.

Type of organization	Name
CGIAR Centers	ILRI, ICRISAT, IFPRI, CIMMYT, IWMI, IPGRI, CIAT, IRRI, and CIP
Challenge Programmes or Inter-Center Initiatives	Challenge Program for Water and Food

General Reaction

Most participants appear to have been satisfied with the overall organization and implementation of the workshop. At the end of the workshop, participants were asked to make closing statements on the training. Among them, most stated that they were very satisfied with the skills they learned and hoped to share them with others. Participants indicated that the skills learnt during the workshop were not only helpful to improve their leadership role, but also their approach on collaborative research.

Participants were also very pleased with the workshop facilitator, Dr. Kaner. Some of the comments of participants are shown below.

“I was a little reluctant about taking the course because I wasn't sure how useful it was going to be. After taking the course I was very happy that I decided to take the time to take the course.”

“It was one of the best workshops/training that I have been to.”

“The course was very useful in developing facilitation skills. I look forward to use the tools and techniques in my work.”

¹ www.surveymonkey.com

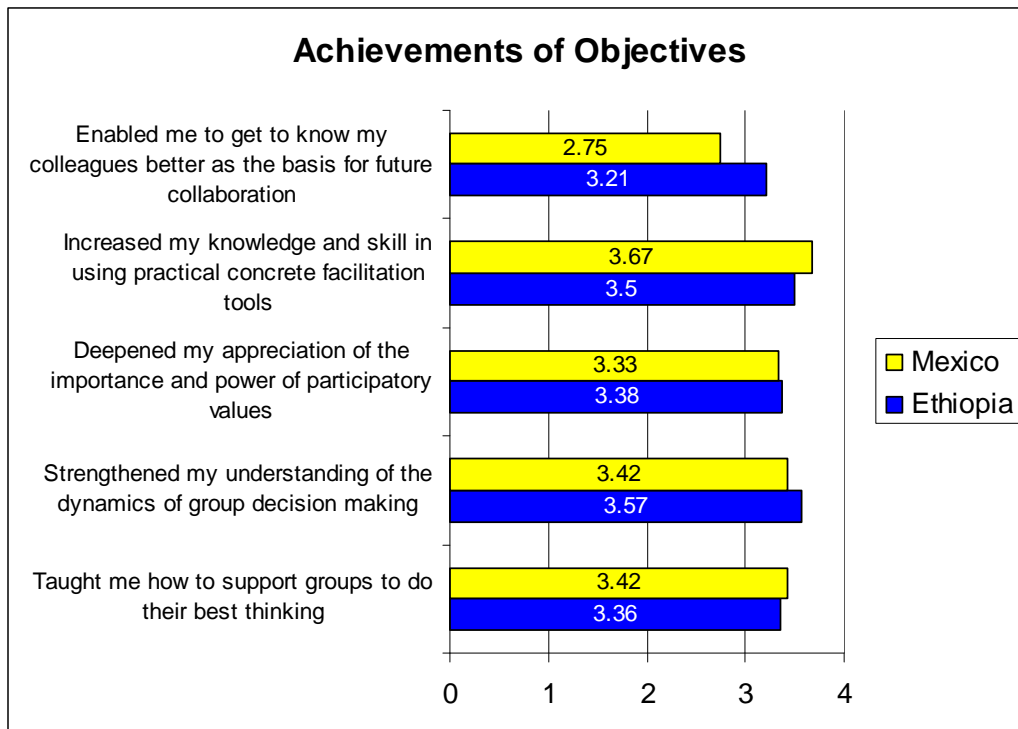
“The training was fun! Sam is passionate about what he does ... and he really did a great job.”

“...the training was useful and important particularly in my context where I work with multiple partner institutions...”

“Surprised at how much there was to learn about facilitation, pleased with the very practical nature of the course and especially aware that its just a beginning.”

The overall purpose of this workshop was to build capacity to facilitate meetings, teams, and group decision-making processes in the CGIAR. (Figure 1). On the whole, participants felt that the training increased their facilitation knowledge and skills, and strengthened their understanding of the dynamics of group decision making, taught them to support groups in their thinking and decision making and deepened their appreciation of the importance and power of participatory values.

Figure 1. Participants’ general assessment of the training (average participant scores on a 4-point scale)

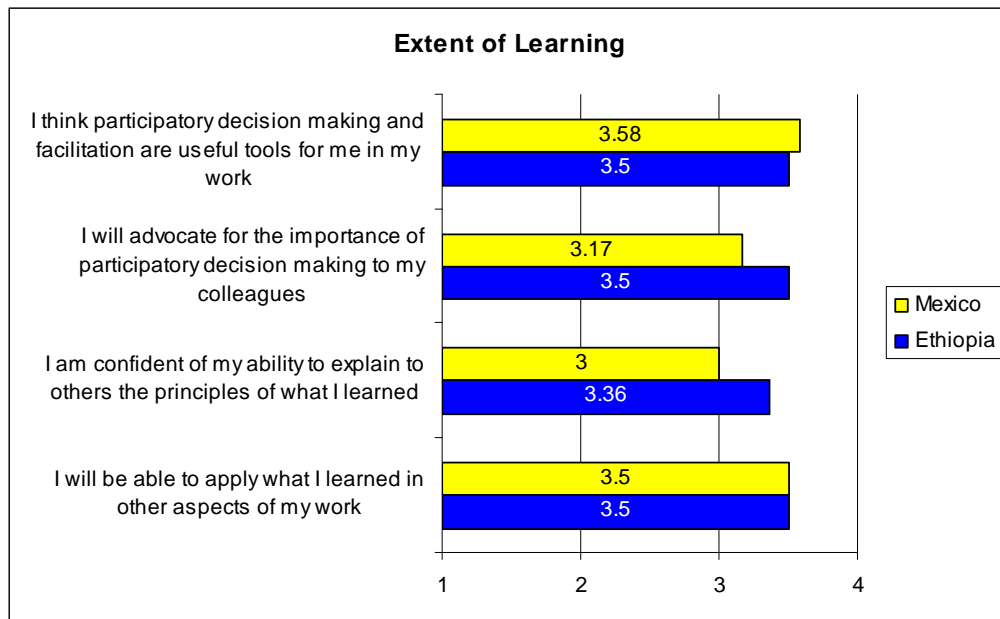


Each participant came with his or her own set of personal objectives. Most said that they now have a better understanding of how to facilitate. However, some participants who hoped to build skills for facilitating virtual teams felt this topic was not adequately addressed.

Extent of Learning

All of the respondents reported that they had learned a great deal from the training and were now able to use participatory decision-making and facilitation tools in their work. Because of their positive experience, some participants plan to advocate the importance of these skills not just to facilitate internal meetings, but also in dealing with partners in the field. Figure 2 illustrates participant’s responses on how much they have learned.

Figure 2. Extent of learning (participant scores on a 4-point scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 4 being strongly agree)



Respondents reported learning in two major areas. One of these was learning about skills and tools that could be used in facilitation. The second area was learning about the importance of participatory processes for decision making for building commitment and engagement. Many respondents also felt that the training should be offered to others (such as Top Management and partners). The training reiterated how important group decision-making is in the CGIAR’s work. Several quotes related to learning are shown below.

“The course was very deep and provided a lot of new knowledge.”

“Helping people to do their best thinking is an objective that I have as a research leader.”

“It was a fantastic learning experience!”

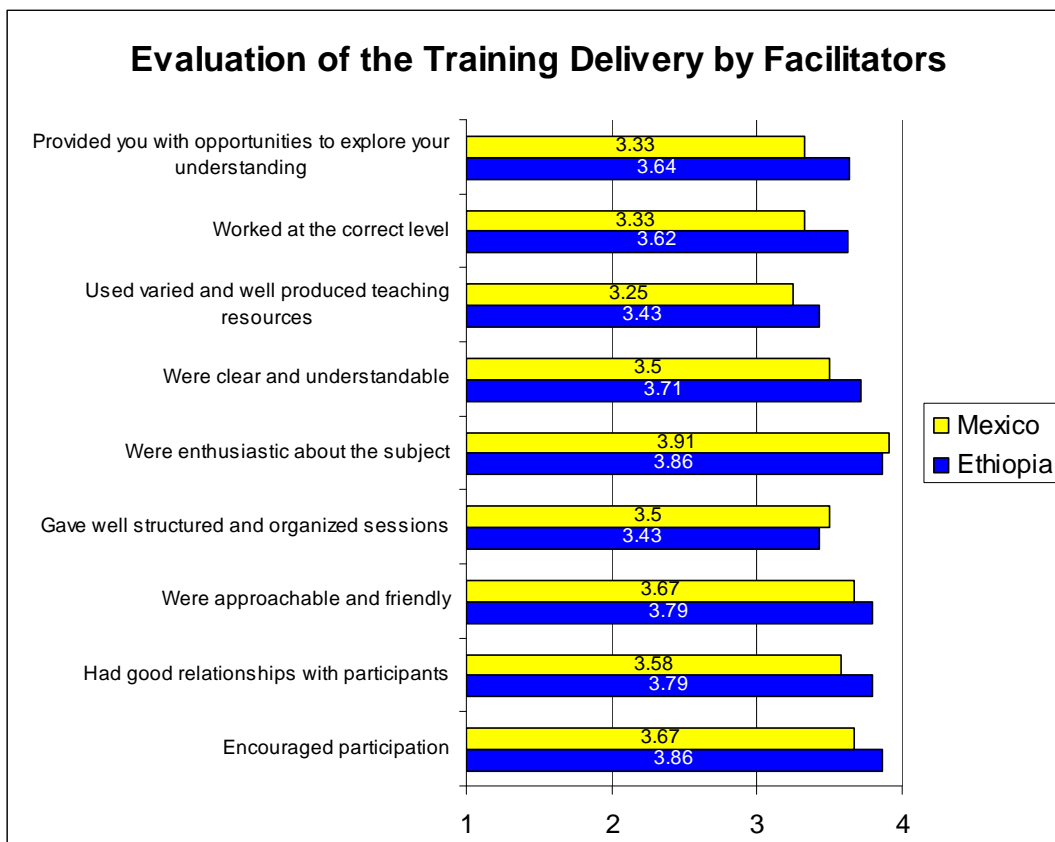
“I have had only limited knowledge about the group dynamics prior to the course. To observe this aspect of facilitation process was probably the most useful for me.”

“When I came into the training course I was expecting to learn how to conduct meetings efficiently and to reach decision as fast as possible. I went away with a much more realistic expectation and a deeper understanding of the process of group decision making.”

Quality of Training Delivery

Participants gave high marks to the trainer (Dr. Kaner) and his assistants (Jamie Watts in Ethiopia and Buffy Balderston in Mexico) for the delivery of the training (Figure 3). Virtually every participant agreed that the trainer was clear, easily understood and enthusiastic. Participants appreciated the well-organized sessions and the highly participatory nature of the course.

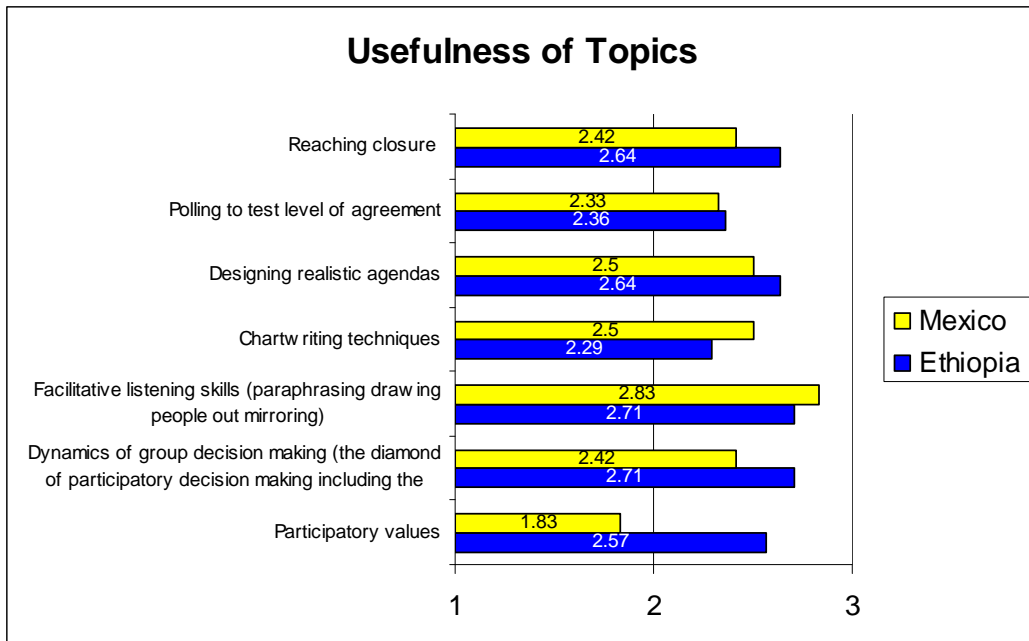
Figure 3. Evaluation of the training delivery by the facilitators (on a 4 point scale with 1 being strongly disagree and 4 being strongly agree)



Main Strengths and Weaknesses

Most participants felt that the topics presented during the workshop were very useful. Of the various topics covered, facilitative listening and group decision making were considered to be the most useful (Figure 4).

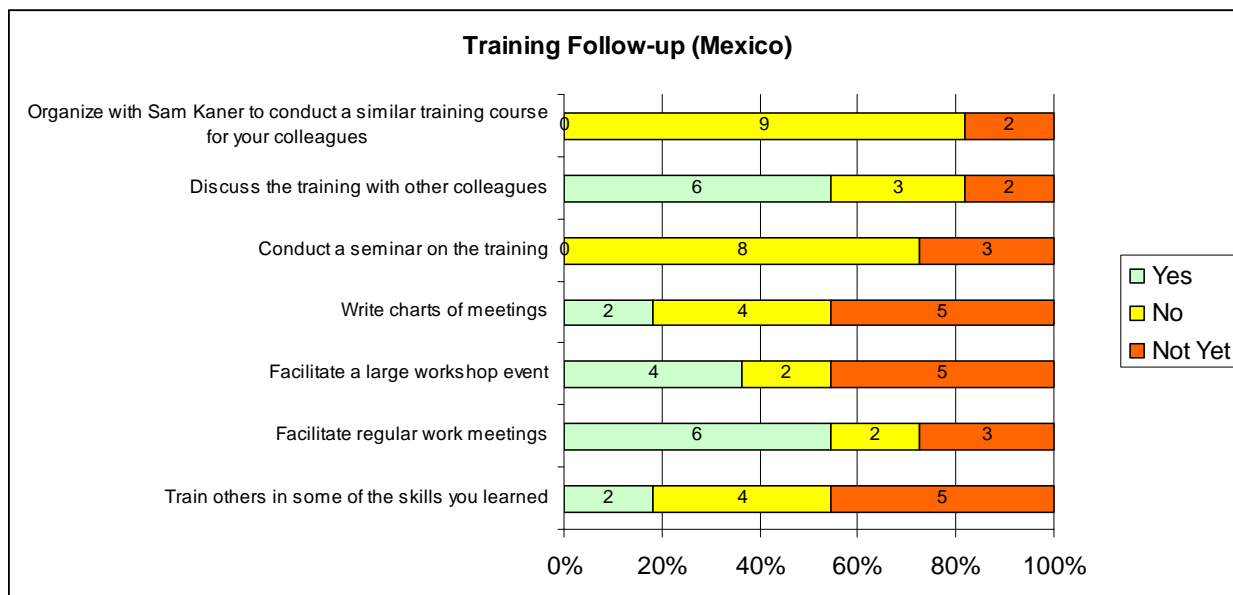
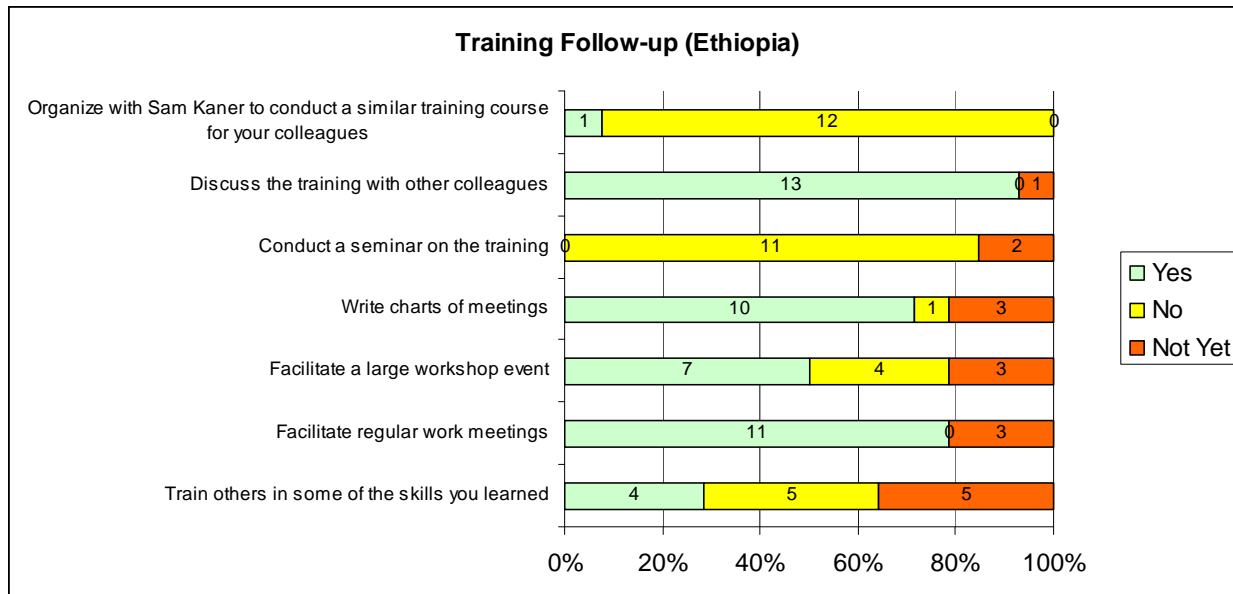
Figure 4. Usefulness of the topics covered (average score on a 3-point scale with 1 being of limited use and 3 being very useful)



Follow-up Actions After the Workshop

Participants were asked if they had used the skills they learned after the workshop. More than 90% of the respondents said they had discussed the training with other colleagues. Three-quarters had utilized chart-writing skills and over 60% had facilitated meetings at work (Figure 5 and 6). Three-fifths of the respondents also said they had trained other colleagues in some aspect of facilitation. Two participants reported that they had contracted Dr. Kaner to organize similar training courses at their centers and four said they had plans to do so in the near future.

Figure 5 and 6. Training follow-up by participants.



Respondents described how they have done or plan to use some of the skills they have learned in the workshop:

“I have discussed with IRRI management about the value of the course and have encouraged them to offer IRRI as a venue if the CGIAR arranges further courses with Sam.”

“I will be organizing a three day work shop with about 30 participants from around the world in May 2007. I am planning to use several of the skills that I learned at this course. Two other people that took the facilitation course will also be at this meeting. I am planning to ask them to help me with the facilitation of this meeting.”

“At our program we have started to share facilitation role of regular staff meetings. I will also soon have a chance to facilitate multi-stakeholder meeting on wheat quality improvement. I am planning to incorporate some aspects of facilitation into the training courses that are organized at CIMMYT.”

“I have in the past facilitated large workshop events and have recently discussed some of the techniques learnt during the workshop in Mexico. I am planning to be a resource person for facilitation in my current work, as part of my terms of reference.”

“I chaired a discussion at a recent workshop and used 'stacking' and 'tracking' techniques as well as paraphrasing etc. The discussion went well, far better than it would have done had I not attended the facilitator workshop.”

“I facilitate meeting in my program and have used some of the skills and techniques, particularly those that help to reach a consensus. I also facilitated a regional workshop in which I used some of the skills.”

“I would love to have everyone in my office to go on this course but I don't have the resources or the authority to decide this. I am planning to generate interest in the office for these events by using some of the monthly seminar slots to share some facilitation skills with colleagues, try out some of the tools and exercises with them like world cafe and empty chair...etc so that I can practice these on my colleagues and gain experience in a safe environment that way.”

“I used the skills learnt in a Steering Committee meeting held with the Project I am involved in. Have also used the information with colleagues in a relatively informal way.”

“Plan to hold a session on basic facilitation skills during our Unit retreat in early 2007”

“I need and use these skills frequently in my day-to-day work”

“I fully intend to ensure that I use facilitated work meetings in my next job. I would like to organise training with Sam - but am not sure there would be the resources in my new job - ILRI have been discussing such courses and I really hope they will follow this through..”

“I have held two workshops with 35 participants each and because of the size, I have trained a research assistant to work with me, receiving requests from other scientists to train their assistants. Have also received requests from scientists to run them through Kaner's book on facilitating decision making. Have interjected to provide facilitative input (where I was a participant) after noticing that the group was in a groan zone and the facilitator (had not been to Kaner's workshops) was under stress to "jump out" of the groan zone without leading and letting the group get to closure. Many times (in 3/4) of the time my input was welcomed.”

Recommendations for Future Facilitation Training

This course was highly recommended by those who experienced it. When asked if they would recommend more training in facilitation for CGIAR staff and managers, 100% of the respondents of the Ethiopian workshop replied affirmatively against 82% of the participants from the Mexican workshop.

Participants recommended that all CG offices should implement this training “*until everyone has taken the course*”.

Several respondents said that it would be a useful training for a wide variety of staff, with the following specific groups identified as a priority:

- CGIAR Scientists
- Senior management
- Middle level supervisors
- Research Assistants

Participants also indicated that training those who have already participated would reinforce their skills and having the training conducted regionally, particularly in SSA, will be a great advantage (recommended by participants from CIMMYT).