

## Options for introducing ILAC

An 'ILAC menu' of options is emerging to foster new modes of professional behaviour and promote continuous learning and change. These options are available in four strategic areas:

### Providing external stimulation and support for ILAC

- Create a forum for research investors (donors) to discuss means by which they could stimulate institutional learning and change.
- Encourage investors to support ILAC by making it a criterion for funding proposals.
- Initiate learning alliances involving agricultural research organizations and non-traditional partners (including national and international NGOs, community-based organizations, the private sector, development agencies and organizations working in other sectors, such as health and nutrition).
- Create a forum for agricultural research organizations to share experiences with ILAC and to stimulate learning, networking and mutual support.

### Creating a supportive internal environment

- Foster an organizational culture that values information sharing, diversity, mutual respect, teamwork, risk-taking, tolerance of error and critical self-reflection.
- Analyse the role of research within the agricultural innovation system and its implications for project design and implementation.
- Promote leadership in learning and change by conducting workshops on the role of management in learning organizations.
- Publish a series of case histories, from CGIAR centres and their partners, documenting practical experiences of managing change through innovation and learning.

### Reorienting management systems

- Identify and implement ways in which evaluation and assessment can be oriented more towards learning and performance improvement.
- Identify and develop options for incorporating learning processes into decision making and priority setting.
- Ensure that staff management practices (e.g. recruitment, evaluation, training, and career development) value learning and processing skills as well as disciplinary expertise.
- Allocate a proportion of research funds to exploratory projects (some of which may be high-risk/high-return ventures).

### Developing and enhancing knowledge, skills and capabilities

- Initiate pilot learning experiments in which the staff of CGIAR centres and their partners investigate ways of reorienting research more towards poverty reduction.
- Document case histories of innovations to determine which approaches are successful (and why) and to assemble evidence in support of learning-based approaches.
- Train scientists in participatory approaches, group facilitation techniques and participatory monitoring and evaluation.
- Establish an ILAC support service that would promote documentation, information sharing, skills development and organizational change.



R. GILING / Linear

## Frameworks for development practice: shifts and expanded options

|                                 | From                          | Expanded to include                     |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Paradigm of and for:            | • Things                      | • People                                |
| Orientation:                    | • Top down                    | • Bottom up                             |
| Modes/approaches:               | • Standardized                | • Diverse                               |
|                                 | • Linear                      | • Complex                               |
|                                 | • Reductionist                | • Systems                               |
| Conditions:                     | • Controlled                  | • Uncontrolled (-able)                  |
|                                 | • Stable                      | • Dynamic                               |
|                                 | • Predictable                 | • Unpredictable                         |
| Research mode:                  | • Experimental                | • Action research                       |
| Learning:                       | • Ex-post                     | • Continuous                            |
| Roles:                          | • Teacher                     | • Facilitator                           |
|                                 | • Supervisor                  | • Coach                                 |
|                                 | • External evaluator          | • Evaluation facilitator                |
| Outcomes:                       | • Products and infrastructure | • Processes and capability              |
| Main purpose of evaluation:     | • Accountability and control  | • Learning and improvement              |
| Accountability to:              | • Donors and peers            | • All stakeholders, especially the poor |
| Vision of capacity development: | • Build capacity of others    | • Develop own capacity                  |
| Treatment of failure:           | • Buried or punished          | • Valued as a learning opportunity      |

To express your interest in participating in this pilot initiative, contact Doug Horton ([d.horton@cgiar.org](mailto:d.horton@cgiar.org))

FUTURE  
HARVEST

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# Institutional Learning and Change: A CGIAR Pilot Initiative

## Rationale

Throughout the world, the pace of environmental, social and technological change is accelerating, and this in turn has major implications for the poor and their development prospects. Traditional transfer-of-technology approaches to agricultural research can no longer keep pace with the complex, diverse, risk-prone and dynamic circumstances of poor farmers. If agricultural research organizations are to be more successful in reducing poverty and increasing the sustainability of agricultural production, they must become less isolated, more interconnected and more responsive. In so doing, they must transform themselves into learning organizations, more in touch with stakeholders' 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) as a key area for intervention if research is to be more efficient and effective in serving the poor. This leaflet introduces the concept of ILAC and invites the CGIAR centres and their partners to express their interest in exploring its implications for their work.

## What is ILAC?

Problem-solving agricultural research, by its very nature, is a risky enterprise. It involves a process of trial and error in which relatively few research paths achieve their intended goals and impact positively on the livelihoods of the poor. ILAC can be described as a 'process of reflection, reframing and use of lessons learned during the research process that results in changed behaviour and improved performance'. Within the framework of

ILAC, a set of options is emerging for strengthening organizational performance and encouraging new modes of professional behaviour. The process is concerned with the rules, norms and conventions that frame decision making. ILAC 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 less successful research paths in order to chart changes in objectives, strategies and methods. In such an environment, errors and dead ends are recognized as opportunities for both individual and institutional learning that can lead to improved performance.

**'To be serious about poverty, the national and international agricultural R&D community has to be serious about institutional learning and change.'**

Robert Chambers, 2003

## Entry points for ILAC

Learning and change can occur at the level of systems, organizations, programmes and individuals. The ability to learn and change is affected by the external environment, the internal environment and organizational capacity. Both top-down and bottom-up approaches to ILAC are needed: top-down for support, legitimization and protection, and bottom-up to allow for individual encounters and learning, augmented by monitoring and evaluation by field staff and farmers.

At the *system level*, operational paradigms may need to be examined and networks expanded or reconfigured. At the *organizational and programme levels*, strategic planning exercises may be useful to explore new frontiers and to assess what revisions in strategy or tactics may be needed to identify and correct less successful research paths and to address changes in the external environment. It may also be necessary to move away from formal hierarchies towards more decentralized decision-making and operations. At the *individual level*, both researchers and managers need to be more open to learning and change, since institutional change can only occur through changes in behaviour, attitudes, relationships and activities, all of which depend on individual insights and decisions.

### Ways forward: towards learning organizations

Four complementary, synergistic approaches are proposed for fostering institutional learning and change and for developing learning organizations:

- **Developing a supportive external environment.** Donors can play a key role in encouraging and rewarding more explicit, transparent and self-critical learning and change in research centres. The process can be further facilitated through networking and building alliances both outside and inside the CGIAR.
- **Fostering a culture of learning and change.** This can be achieved by promoting values, beliefs, norms and traditions that positively influence behaviour and performance. Examples include seeking out new partners who offer diverse perspectives on development challenges, fostering open, enabling and non-hierarchical relationships, and supporting and facilitating critical review and reflection.

**‘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 External Review, 1998

- **Reorienting management systems.** All elements of management should be reviewed, including decision-making processes, approaches to planning, recruitment, training, monitoring and evaluation, and reward systems: all should encourage and celebrate risk-taking, innovation and learning.
- **Developing and enhancing individual awareness, knowledge and capabilities.** This may include pilot initiatives to study innovation and learning within ongoing work, training to develop new process-oriented skills and the provision of support services to allow CGIAR staff and partners to design and implement learning-oriented activities.

The activities proposed under this pilot initiative are exploratory. They include learning within existing projects, documenting innovation histories, and exploiting opportunities to learn from both successes and failures. Initially, the focus will be on providing support to enable CGIAR centres to adopt an ILAC orientation in their work.

Successful ILAC activities will – indeed, must – connect with real work goals and processes. They will focus on improving performance and will engage people who have the power to promote and protect ILAC. By balancing and combining action and learning with review and critical reflection, these activities will enhance and reward people’s capabilities, both individually and collectively.

A critical element of ILAC is reflection on the process of learning and change itself. This is a vital part of an iterative process of improvement: ILAC is not a predetermined blueprint, but an evolving approach with processes which themselves demand learning and change. Embracing the ILAC approach will help to develop a more transparent, productive and efficient CGIAR system which can more effectively contribute to the reduction of poverty.



S. PARROTT / Green Ink

**‘We know that 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.’**

Peter Matlon, 2003

### The changing context of agricultural research and development

Three major trends – climate change, economic globalization and population growth – are exposing rural communities to greater pressures and risks than ever before. At the same time, innovations in biotechnology, information technology and communications present tremendous opportunities for the rapid advancement of the poor. In the light of these trends, many research managers are realizing that they – and their organizations – will only succeed if they develop the skills and capacities needed to cope with rapid change.

The wider development context is also evolving rapidly and significant changes are occurring in development paradigms and strategies. To cope with increasing complexity and respond quickly to new opportunities, the CGIAR centres need flexible, adaptive institutional arrangements.

The challenges are great, and must be addressed in a way that takes into account the following features of this changing context:

- A more sophisticated understanding of how development occurs, which recognizes that innovation arises from multiple sources and from the actions of a number of participants.
- The emergence of a large number and diverse range of organizations associated with agriculture and rural development, including NGOs, private companies, farmer-operated enterprises and research foundations.
- New working practices involving grass-roots participation and partnership.
- Changing norms of governance and democracy, including such issues as decentralization and reassessing and reorienting the role of government.
- New concepts and patterns of knowledge ownership, particularly in the field of biotechnology.
- New opportunities presented by rapid developments in biotechnology and information technology.
- Increasingly rapid rates of learning and diffusion as a result of improvements in information technology and communications.
- Globalization and the increasing influence of international markets on the pace and direction of technological change.
- Environmental degradation and climate change.
- The increasingly important role of knowledge in the global economy.
- Rapidly shifting patterns of alliances and partnerships.

**‘Organizational learning occurs when individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on the organization’s behalf.’**

Chris Argyris and David Schön, 1996



INPRC/IC-UPWARD

**‘For the individual as well as for organizations and networks, the challenges of ILAC can be formidable. Institutional change requires continuous personal learning and change. Self-critical reflection, and learning from error as well as from success are vital elements.’**

Robert Chambers, 2003



J. SCHYTTÉ / Linear

### Innovation Systems, ILAC and the CGIAR

ILAC draws inspiration from a number of fields including sociology, institutional economics, management sciences, adult education, action research, systems research, innovation policy and participatory evaluation. Recent advances in these fields have fundamental implications for the way research and development organizations go about their business. With their emphasis on empowerment, accountability, diversity, complexity and continuous learning, these advances offer fresh insights for improving the contribution of agricultural research and development to poverty reduction.

ILAC responds to the need to move on from the old transfer-of-technology model of innovation to something more suitable for contemporary development needs. The concept of innovation systems is increasingly being used to articulate what this new model might look like. This concept helps clarify the nature, role and modus operandi of agricultural research centres as part of a larger, dynamic whole, dedicated to improving the lives of the poor.

At its simplest, an innovation system has three elements: (1) the *organizations and individuals* involved in generating, diffusing, adapting and using new knowledge; (2) the *interactive learning* that occurs when organizations engage in these processes and the way this leads to new products and processes (innovation); and (3) the *institutions* (rules, norms and conventions) that govern how these interactions and processes take place.

This way of viewing innovation has a number of important implications for research organizations and the way they operate:

- Research organizations need to collaborate with others. Innovation involves not only formal research and research organizations but a range of other bodies and non-research tasks. Making contacts and forming these partnerships, alliances and coalitions are extremely important for all research organizations, since these links facilitate learning and information flow.
- Since innovation is an essentially social process that is influenced by institutional arrangements, institutional innovations are often crucial for successful technological change.
- Research organizations need to be flexible. The roles of different organizations are not fixed but should evolve over time. Similarly, there is no blueprint for structuring research processes: they should also evolve over time, leading to the use of a range of different approaches.
- Research organizations need to develop not only pro-poor technology but also pro-poor institutional arrangements. For this reason, research on institutions is as important as research on technological issues. New research and development approaches can become important international public goods.
- Both researchers and managers need to be open to learning and change, since they are the key determinants of institutional change.