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Policy-Oriented Research in the CGIAR

Policy-oriented research (POR) occupies a large and growing portion of the portfolio of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). When conservatively estimated using standard definitions of CGIAR outputs, the current annual budget for POR in the CGIAR is more than \$70 million (18 percent of the total investment), having risen from less than \$30 million in 1995 (9 percent). Using a more liberal definition based on listings of potential users of policy-related research outputs, this figure may be more than twice that. Indeed, the work of four CGIAR Centers — the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) and International Water Management Research Institute (IWMI) — is almost entirely policy-oriented.

Despite this sizeable investment over time, POR is an area of CGIAR activity least investigated for impact. That policy research and, with it, research on natural resource management remain “under-evaluated” areas of investment in the CGIAR was a key point highlighted in a major World Bank evaluation study 2 years ago, and has since raised critical questions about the direction of the CGIAR.¹ With only limited evidence of past impact from POR, is there a compelling rationale for increasing investment in this area relative to research that has more documented impact, such as crop genetic improvement? To address the first element of this question, the Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA) of the Science Council of the CGIAR investigated related questions: What is the extent of impact demonstrated to date? What is feasible in expanding the body of documented impacts for this area of research? For answers, SPIA launched a scoping study on POR impact assessment to assess what has been done in the past, whether new approaches and studies are called for and feasible, and the desirable options for future consideration.

In *Impact Assessment of Policy-Oriented Research in the CGIAR: A Scoping Study Report*, SPIA recognizes that POR impact assessment poses special problems. (Policy-oriented research here refers not to a research discipline but to any research — economic, social, biological or physical — that ultimately aims to influence policy as its primary impact pathway.) Policymaking is a political process, the report observes, not an analytical or problem-solving process, so information is often used selectively. How policymakers use information is neither observable nor easy to track, as there are no reliable, objectively verifiable indicators of adoption. Even when influential information and recommendations emerging from POR are adapted and modified through political compromise, research findings often reach policymakers through indirect pathways. Further, POR is not the exclusive purview of the CGIAR. There is also the conundrum of evaluating impact in cases where

research confirms the value and desirability of existing policy settings — that is, when the beneficial impact is the avoidance of unfavorable changes.

The challenges of assessing attribution and establishing appropriate counterfactuals do not reduce stakeholder demands to demonstrate impact from POR in CGIAR Centers. SPIA began its study by reviewing the literature on the role played by research information in the formulation of agricultural policies. It analyzed the CGIAR's POR portfolio, distinguishing among the various types (process-oriented, methods-oriented, policy analysis and management-oriented) and their logical pathways to impact, and tracked trends in the CGIAR's investment in POR.

An inventory of the Centers' 700 *ex post* impact assessments identified only 25 (nearly half from IFPRI) that trace the diffusion (uptake), influence and/or impact of POR outputs. Most focus only on diffusion. Ten go so far as to document influence, and only three attempt to estimate economic impact, albeit only at the national level. Estimates of economic impacts of CGIAR outputs more oriented toward international public goods that derive from POR are not yet available. SPIA concludes from this study that far too little impact or influence has been rigorously documented to justify the CGIAR's investment in POR. Although documenting diffusion and influence is valuable and challenging enough, additional efforts must also be devoted to moving further along the impact pathway from research to impact on the ultimate goals of the CGIAR, those related to poverty alleviation, food security, and environmental protection and enhancement. For this reason, the report stresses the need to push the methodological frontiers of POR impact assessment and undertake more case studies to convincingly document the influence of POR both on policy outcomes, influences and responses and subsequently on the achievement of CGIAR goals. While SPIA endorses the need for a follow-up study to move the System forward in this direction, it also fully acknowledges the daunting challenge of translating assessments of intermediate products such as policy outcomes, influences and responses into actual impacts on CGIAR goals.

Virtually all POR impact assessment conducted by the CGIAR to date has been supply-led, starting with outputs from a Center's research and examining to what extent they influenced policy, recognizing that this approach has not always adequately acknowledged the contributions of other influences. A demand-led approach, the report explains, would start with a given policy change and work backwards to investigate the multiple forces and pathways by which the policy change occurred, thereby establishing a more objective context against which the Center's contribution, i.e., its influence, can be assessed. Demand-led assessment would entail disaggregating the contributions of many actors and impact pathways over long periods and so would likely be more burdensome and problematic to undertake than supply-led approaches and thus would require some methodological innovations.

Both supply- and demand-led approaches would nevertheless be considered relevant in a second phase of the POR impact assessment study that would aim to strengthen and expand

upon the existing evidence of credible impacts. SPIA suggests several options for consideration, individually or in combination, in the second phase. These are to:

- (i) undertake a thorough review of methodologies in POR impact assessment that could be used effectively in the future to enhance accountability, especially how to assess the impact of generic policy knowledge available to all as international public goods;
- (ii) select from several of the 25 POR impact assessment studies that document influence and then seek to extend them to quantify economic and other benefits;
- (iii) undertake new studies, using a multidisciplinary demand-side perspective, that seek to document the influence and/or impact of CGIAR POR and compare it with the contributions of other policy actors;
- (iv) identify completed supply-side impact assessments for research on crop genetic improvement and/or integrated pest management for which success depended critically on the adoption of a specific policy or regulation, and then attempt to attribute part of the benefit to supportive POR; and/or
- (v) undertake new supply-side POR impact assessment studies where significant influences and impacts are deemed likely to exist, though so far unmeasured and undocumented.

A strategic issue to consider is to what extent other disciplines could contribute to a second phase of the POR impact assessment study, where these options are explored. Up until now, impact assessment of POR research has been dominated by economists. To what degree could sociologists, ethnographers, political scientists and/or historians complement economists in order to better capture the complexities of policymaking processes and thereby improve researchers' ability to assess influences, outcomes, responses and impacts? The report suggests that political scientists and other social scientists might help in refining methodologies that could assist in the analysis of policymaking processes within each of the identified options.

SPIA concludes that, while POR impact assessment is a challenging enterprise, there are encouraging signs that progress may be possible. Certain Center impact assessments have succeeded in rigorously quantifying substantial economic benefits from POR. Recent papers have suggested novel approaches, such as Bayesian analysis, that offer innovative means to appraise research benefits. With some additional investment and concerted effort, the CGIAR will likely be able to offer a more conclusive answer to questions concerning the impacts of past investments in POR than has been possible in the recent past.

Notes

- 1 World Bank Operations Evaluation Department. 2003. *The CGIAR at 31: An Independent Meta-Evaluation of the CGIAR, Volume 1: Overview Report*. Washington, DC.



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