

Capacity Development: It is people and local organizations that matter!

Capacity Development led by CGIAR can help agriculturalists in developing countries discover and develop their own expertise and confidence. But it is through capacity development interventions in, and by, whole communities and (local) organizations in these countries that most potently translate actions into meaningful reductions in poverty, food insecurity and environmental degradation.

While the importance of capacity development is often acknowledged (it is reiterated ten times in the proposal from the Open Working Group on the proposed [Sustainable Development Goals](#) [SDGs] in addition to two explicit references to partnerships), experience in CGIAR and elsewhere shows that this work often lacks concerted effort and concomitant investment.

The [CGIAR Research Program on Livestock and Fish](#), which is led by the [International Livestock Research Institute](#), is leading a major initiative to consolidate research and development efforts for a pro-poor transformation of smallholder value chains. The idea is to help smallholders intensify and commercialize their agriculture. This multi-centre research program, which focuses on promising livestock and fish value chains in Latin America, Asia and Africa, will make its scientific research relevant by fostering the leap from individual learning to sustainable livelihood outcomes and impacts through an integrated capacity development approach paying particular attention to gender issues and women's empowerment.

This means for example, that we facilitate and identify innovations and breakthroughs in (e-)learning approaches (gaming, mobile/ICT etc.) through [high-quality training packages](#) and collaborations that are aimed specifically for organizational strengthening purposes and which are tailored to the cultural, organizational and institutional contexts in which the new agricultural knowledge is to be applied. We will try to find ways to better capture and package "knowledge", accepting it is a mere moment of 'truth' within an ever evolving process of understanding, and share broadly because (research) messages may bring others on board and will generate participation and further cross-fertilization. And we will use social media and other technologies more effectively to bypass traditional hierarchies and gatekeepers so that rural communities can access valuable knowledge, best practices and lessons learned from sources presently outside their reach.

Transformational innovations are often not demand-driven and scientists and innovators have often envisioned transformational ideas, technical and commercial opportunities without apparent demand being there in advance. Finding a balance where space is preserved to emerging opportunities, imagination and innovative projects with potential transformational value is thus extremely important.

For our research to make a difference in people's everyday lives, we strongly engage with diverse local groups, from policy makers to youth groups to farmer associations and women cooperatives, business market hubs to local private sector enterprises (such our ['Pig Production and Marketing Ltd.'](#) partner in

Uganda). We engage our local stakeholders in value chain assessments (such as conducted in [Ethiopia](#), [Egypt](#), [Burkina Faso](#), and, most recently, [Bangladesh](#)) as well as in preliminary capacity assessment processes (like in [Tanzania and Uganda](#)).

Our research program is making investments not only in research and related capacity development, but also in innovation systems and platforms, participatory tools and data analyses that help strengthen networks of all kinds (e.g. the [national innovation platform in Egypt](#) and the [national and regional dairy development forums in Tanzania](#)). We employ iterative, facilitated and participatory processes and are continually using feedback mechanisms to re-assess and fine-tune our approaches and interpretations to re-evaluate our goals, direction and interventions, showing genuine respect for and listening to communities who may think differently and (fundamentally) challenge our own knowledge and thinking, seeking combined insights that could be key for the solutions we seek.

A seeming lack of ‘absorptive capacity’ by marginalized communities and their organizations is not an argument against but rather *for* making investments in (local) capacity development. And we want to bring research on capacity development, partnership arrangements and innovation much more into the core of the CGIAR’s research projects. We want to move this work centre-stage in (new research) design, implementation and evaluation.

How should we start to bring this about?

Will the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) allow us to address capacity development in a smarter and more coherent way? Can development organizations, CGIAR programs and centres work together more efficiently and effectively to address today’s complex and dynamic research *for* development challenges? Can we come up with modalities (such as the [capacity development facilities](#)) and design frameworks shaped by local contexts that allow us to pool resources, co-finance work, identify services and products that suit demands and support national ownership of our research *for* development work?

And how will we ensure that our program rigorously captures, validates and disseminates evidence-based best practices? For that to happen I think that our CGIAR research programs need to run data-driven experiments with a clear hypothesis, with a relentless focus on (measuring capacity) results, with rapid feedback loops, and with iterative steps. And we need to understand that no matter how good a policy, a research (publication) or technical intervention appears, executing and operationalizing it is always harder than it looks.

And let us not forget that execution may require (new?) adaptive leadership that draws on the strengths of multi-skilled teams, that takes coherent approaches providing support to our partners, that establishes shared goals and values, that mobilizes energies, (political) interests and passions, and, perhaps most important, that builds on, rather than displaces, existing local capacities and initiatives.

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