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# Learning-oriented evaluation: A tool for promoting institutional learning and program improvement

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Evaluation processes of all types, including monitoring, review and impact assessment, offer unique opportunities for learning and provide useful feedback on what works and what doesn't, and the reasons for success or failure. Involving staff members, partners and beneficiaries in the evaluation process allows them to reflect on their work, revisit their understanding of the project's goals and activities, assess their effectiveness and take ownership of the evaluation findings. The knowledge created and the lessons learned through evaluation subsequently provide a basis for better project planning and implementation. This Brief outlines an evaluation approach that promotes learning and program improvement; it contrasts this approach with accountability-focused evaluation and it provides an example of learning-oriented evaluation from within the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

## Introduction

Organizations learn by accumulating knowledge from their experiences, disseminating that knowledge to staff and partners, reflecting on it and using it to plan and adapt their activities. Some knowledge comes from monitoring and evaluation activities, such as annual reporting, preparation of donor reports, external expert reviews and impact assessments. This Brief shows how an evaluation can foster learning and program improvement by creating an inclusive environment in which staff and partners take ownership of the evaluation process and its outcome. The information should help managers who want to optimize investments in different types of evaluation.

## Evaluation for learning and program improvement

Learning is the acquisition of knowledge or skills through experience or study. The constructivist school of learning suggests that individuals and groups learn by interpreting, understanding and making sense of their own experiences and that effective learning often takes place through the social experience of working together. This can change the mindset of the learner, enabling him/her to break from traditional knowledge, beliefs and practices and adopt a new approach. Such transformational learning involves examining, questioning, validating and revising one's goals and assumptions and the strategies and activities undertaken to achieve those goals.

Learning can occur at the level of the individual, the group or the organization. Organizational learning refers to an organization's ability to accumulate knowledge from its own experiences, disseminate it to members, reflect on it and use it to plan, adapt and cope with change. It is fundamentally concerned with seeking out knowledge on what has worked and what has not. Organizational learning is crucial for program improvement, since individuals may have insufficient influence or authority to shape and change program orientation and they may change jobs or leave the organization.

Evaluation is a mechanism for accumulating knowledge on programs and their results. If carried out with a learning objective in mind, it is also a means of engaging staff and

partners in a process of reflection, in which they apply the knowledge gained through evaluation to improve their programs. Involving staff, partners and other stakeholders in this way enables them to learn what works and what doesn't and to understand the reasons why. Recent experience with the use of evaluation for learning and program improvement is summarized in Preskill and Torres (1999) and Horton and Mackay (2003). Learning-oriented evaluations involve five key processes:

1. Stakeholders access the information produced during the evaluation.
2. Opportunities are created for them to reflect on the information (individually and in groups).
3. Discussions are organized to help establish patterns and draw conclusions.
4. New activities are undertaken based on the conclusions and insights generated.
5. The new activities are themselves evaluated, so that evaluation and learning continue throughout the life of a project or program.

Engaging stakeholders in a common evaluation process allows them to interpret and make sense of their experiences collectively, encouraging them to break from traditional practices and to adopt new approaches that lead to more effective accomplishment of goals. The table overleaf outlines the contrasting features of evaluation for accountability and evaluation for learning.

## Learning-oriented external reviews in IPGRI

In 2001, the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) revised its Center Commissioned External Review (CCER) process with the aim of enhancing organizational learning and program improvement. IPGRI had become aware of the contribution a learning-oriented process could make, while management and staff had expressed concerns about past review processes. General concerns related to the potential for the program team to play a greater role, and the need to improve the function of the CCER panel and sharpen the focus/improve the process of the review. Specific concerns included: a) inadequate involvement of scientists and management in the review process, and thus failure to maximize the potential of the review

### Contrasting features of evaluation for accountability and for learning and program improvement

	Evaluation for accountability	Evaluation for learning and program improvement
Main purpose	Accountability	Learning and improvement
Focus of questions	Were goals achieved?	What worked, what didn't, why, so what?
Stakeholder roles	Provide information Review report	Engage actively in all stages of the evaluation
Assumptions about research	Impacts can be attributed directly to research	Many interlinked factors contribute to change; end results cannot be attributed to specific research investments

process for reflection and learning among those responsible for the programs; b) lack of focus of recommendations arising from the review process on real constraints and how they can be overcome; c) inadequate involvement of stakeholders or beneficiaries in the review process; and d) weaknesses in the external review teams, which included special interests, lack of teamwork and cooperation and inadequate knowledge of the topic or region under review.

In early 2002, IPGRI management introduced two key modifications to the CCER process to make it more learning-oriented. Firstly, the Deputy Director General of Programs requested the relevant IPGRI team to prepare an analytical review document. This included a self-assessment of the program's strengths, weaknesses and gaps, any perceived obstacles to achieving its objectives, and broad future programmatic directions. The team also carried out an assessment of stakeholder perspectives. Using the data collected, they prepared a comprehensive and analytical document for the external review panel that included a list of recommendations for future direction and action.

Secondly, the terms of reference for the expert review panel were modified. These now ensure that any review includes both a backward and a forward look at the work or program. The panel must also critically examine the self-assessment carried out by the team and take this into consideration in the development of its own recommendations. Mechanisms are being established for more effective interaction between the panel and the program team.

To date, four reviews have been conducted using the new approach. In the spirit of continuous learning, IPGRI is currently assessing the effectiveness of the approach and can suggest some ways to further refine the CCER process:

- spend more time planning the review and clarifying the roles of staff members, panel members, management and the Board of Trustees;
- link CCERs more effectively with other planning, monitoring and evaluation functions in IPGRI and the CGIAR;
- focus the external review panel inputs more on strategic and less on operational issues;
- ensure the review panel engages more effectively with staff and stakeholders;
- select external review panel members carefully, to ensure an appropriate balance of technical knowledge and evaluation expertise; and
- provide more overall facilitation of the entire CCER process to ensure that all aspects of the review (including the self-assessment and review by the external panel) are well coordinated and complement each other.

### Reorienting evaluation to enhance learning

Our experience indicates that the following steps can enhance the contribution of CCERs to institutional learning and program improvement:

1. Shift the emphasis of questions. Questions such as: Are we on the right track? Are our assumptions still valid? Is our basic approach still appropriate? are often more useful for program improvement and learning than: Did we do what we intended to do? Was it done efficiently and effectively?
2. Promote self-assessment as the basis for learning and change and allow time and space for stakeholder, beneficiary, external panel and staff interactions.
3. Analyse and assess the causes of mistakes and unexpected outcomes as well as the implications for current and future research.
4. Encourage and involve a broad range of people in defining 'scientific quality'. The quality and relevance of research should be assessed not only by scientific peers but also by beneficiaries and other stakeholders.
5. Use multiple evaluation methods and approaches, including qualitative and quantitative data, to address key questions of concern.
6. Engage other members of the 'innovation system' in the planning, monitoring and evaluation processes.
7. Assess research processes and institutional issues relating to the achievement of impact from research investments, in addition to assessing inputs, outputs and outcomes.
8. Apply all that is learned – what worked, what didn't and why – to redirecting and improving programs and activities.

### Further reading

- Horton, D. and Mackay, R. 2003. Using evaluation to enhance institutional learning and change: Recent experiences with agricultural research and development. *Agricultural Systems* 78: 127–142.
- Preskill, H. and Torres, R.T. 1999. *Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA, USA: Sage Publications.



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The Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative seeks to improve the relevance and effectiveness of agricultural research programs in contributing to sustainable poverty reduction. Hosted by the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), the ILAC Initiative is supported by The Rockefeller Foundation, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and The Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development of Germany, and works with research centres and programs affiliated with the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). ILAC Briefs are issued to stimulate dialogue and disseminate ideas and experiences that researchers and managers can put to use in strengthening organizational learning and performance improvement in their own work. An ILAC Brief may introduce a concept, approach or tool; it may summarize results of a study; or it may highlight results of a recent event.