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# Linking diversity to organizational effectiveness: Lessons from a culture study at CIAT

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This brief describes a 'culture study' carried out to explore how different staff groups perceive the culture of an international research centre and how the management of staff diversity issues affects the work environment and organizational performance. The perceptions of various staff groups were analysed in relation to five aspects of organizational culture: institutional climate; global competitiveness; empowerment and group motivation; work-life balance; and equity in gender and diversity. The study identified what staff believed to be the key strengths and weaknesses in the organization's culture and detected four strategic areas for improvement: internal organizational communications; re-design of job positions and responsibilities; multi-cultural competencies; and gender awareness in the workplace. The diagnostic process is described, as well as the follow-up actions taken to improve the management of gender and diversity in the centre.

## Introduction

If appropriately managed, staff diversity can enhance organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Merrill-Sands et al., 1998). This is particularly true for international organizations with inter-disciplinary and multi-cultural teams. For effective human resources management and social justice and equity, organizations must periodically assess staff perceptions: How do women and men from different backgrounds and cultures feel about working in the organization? How do they relate to colleagues, supervisors and partners in other organizations?

From time to time, organizational structures, policies, procedures and management style should be reviewed to see how they affect staff motivation and institutional performance. The workplace must be professionally fulfilling, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to attain and maintain peak performance.

Within the Alliance of Future Harvest Centers of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) staff are diverse in gender, nationality and culture. This rich staff diversity presents enormous potential for creativity and innovation. The key is for managers to reinforce good practices and to remove impediments hindering individual and organizational efficiency and effectiveness.

This type of study – the first of its kind in the CGIAR – might be useful for institutions that wish to understand their culture and get feedback from staff about the institution's strengths as well as the areas in need of change. It can help to build the desired culture and a positive work environment for all groups of staff, leading the organization to higher levels of performance.

## Why the study?

With headquarters in Colombia, CIAT is one of 15 international agricultural research centres of the CGIAR. CIAT has a diverse, multi-cultural staff numbering nearly 1000 in 18 research stations around the world. At its headquarters in Palmira, Colombia, there were 691 nationally recruited and 56 internationally recruited staff as of mid-2006. At the time this study began in 2003, women made up 20% of CIAT's internationally recruited staff and 36% of its Colombian staff. Thirty-two nationalities,

half of them from developing countries, were represented in the staff as a whole.

CIAT has actively participated in the CGIAR Gender and Diversity (G&D) Program, which aims "to help the CGIAR centres leverage their rich staff diversity to increase research and management excellence. It promotes such activities as diversity-positive recruitment, international teamwork, cross-cultural communications and advancement of women."

CIAT has been involved in the G&D Program mainly through its own G&D Committee. Created in 1998, the Committee has formulated and implemented policies to promote staff diversity and to counter workplace harassment and discrimination. The Committee has also created a website for women professionals and contributed to initiatives for a better workplace: establishing a child day-care service at CIAT headquarters, celebrating Cultural Diversity Week annually, and institutionalizing mentoring for young professionals.

This study, a joint CIAT-G&D project, was originally conceived as an assessment of how G&D issues were being managed at the centre. But CIAT management recommended broadening the scope to cover organizational culture. The rationale was to ascertain staff perceptions on fundamental issues influencing individual and organizational performance.

## Design and implementation

With assistance from consultants, the study was designed and conducted in 2003. Follow-ups based on the findings continue.

The idea was born when the leader of the CGIAR G&D Program visited CIAT's headquarters. G&D funded the study and CIAT established a team to co-ordinate it. Team members included the chairperson of the G&D Committee, the leader of CIAT's Impact Assessment Project, the human resources manager and interested staff members. Summary results were presented to CIAT's management as well as to staff, who identified areas for improvement and helped design specific interventions for change. Some of the interventions were immediate while others were long-term, with the G&D Committee monitoring progress. In November 2005, CIAT's Board of Trustees approved G&D goals for 2006-2010, providing a firm basis for yearly evaluation.

November 2006

ILAC Brief 12

The study used the Régnier Abacus<sup>1</sup> tool to capture staff perceptions on organizational culture. This is a technique for systematizing opinions expressed in groups. A series of statements is presented and group members' level of agreement or disagreement is recorded on a decision scale in the form of an abacus, with five coloured 'beads'. The abacus is based on the logic of the three traffic-light colours – green, amber and red – with light green and pink as intermediate responses. This method highlights the full spectrum of viewpoints and makes for easy interpretation of results and cross-comparisons.

The survey was based on 34 statements covering organizational climate; global competitiveness; staff empowerment and motivation; work–life balance; and balance in gender and diversity.

A total of 115 staff were selected to participate in the study, representing the following groups:

*Colombian nationally recruited staff:*

1. Women at all levels of the institution
2. Men at all levels
3. Research assistants and associates
4. Field workers
5. Administrative and research-support personnel.

*Internationally recruited staff:*

6. International personnel based at headquarters in Cali
  7. Outposted staff.<sup>2</sup>
- Non-CIAT staff working on campus:*
8. Employees of organizations operating facilities at the CIAT Science Park.

Within each of the eight groups, respondents were selected to ensure ranges in age, area of work, years of service and gender. Respondents scored their level of agreement with statements presented. Strong agreement was denoted by green, a neutral perspective by yellow and strong disagreement by red, with light green and pink as intermediate responses, and black and white as abstention due to no opinion or no interest (see Figure 1).

Based on the results of this preliminary exercise, CIAT management immediately approved three actions:

- restructuring job classifications;
- developing a cultural orientation multimedia package;
- incorporating gender and multi-cultural issues in CIAT's leadership courses.

Two activities were designed for the longer term: improving the organizational communication strategy and formulating G&D goals for approval by CIAT's Board of Trustees.

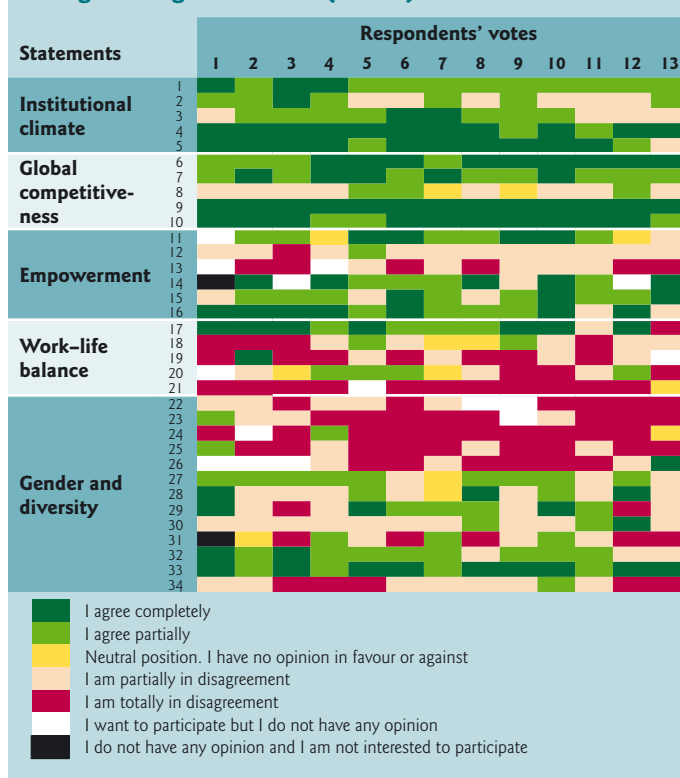
Survey results were presented to staff at open meetings convened around the various focus groups. Participants were asked to comment on the results, and to comment on cultural variables as they related to their group. Where scores were low, staff groups were queried on possible causes and cures. Participants suggested improvements in four broad areas: communications, organization of work, differences in culture and nationalities, and gender balance and awareness. High scores were scrutinized to tease out positive practices contributing to high performance.

Results from the eight focus groups were also discussed at a joint meeting with the committees of four representational bodies at CIAT: assistants and associates; secretaries; the labour union; and the principal staff members' association. Finally, synthesized summary findings were presented to all staff.

<sup>1</sup> See the definition of this tool at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/budget/evaluation/guide/guide07\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/budget/evaluation/guide/guide07_en.htm).

<sup>2</sup> A questionnaire was sent to outposted staff by e-mail, but the response rate was very low. Face-to-face interviews are recommended for outposted employees.

**Figure 1. Initial results from the women focus group using the Régnier Abacus (n = 13).**



**Findings**

A key finding was women staff members' low level of agreement with the statements on gender and diversity balance and work–life balance. This trend is evident from the predominance of pink and red cells in Figure 1 (see also Table 1). Colombian research staff also gave low scores to statements about work organization, relationships with supervisors and differences in culture and nationality (see Figure 2).

Although results from the women focus group showed low gender scores, it was very difficult to disentangle societal and organizational factors contributing to this situation.

In a society whose patriarchal structures are reflected in the workplace, such as the double workload for working women who are still primarily responsible for child care, it is logical that women and men would have different perceptions on the work–home relationship and organizational gender equity. Nonetheless, institutions must recognize that eliminating gender inequity is essential for organizational success.

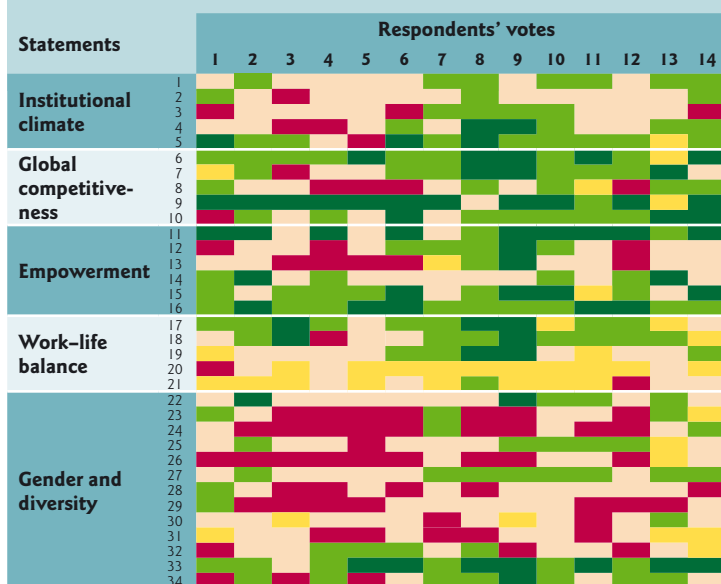
Staff identified organizational strengths needing reinforcement to maintain CIAT's good performance, as well as weaknesses that needed attention. Table 1 presents the top four statements with which the staff agreed or disagreed the most, meaning the highest and lowest scores given by all staff groups. Table 1 also includes statements to which women assigned the lowest scores.

**Applying the findings**

**Internal communication**

The study reported CIAT's external communications as a strength, and internal communications as a weakness. Given this finding, it was necessary to improve internal communications as a key strategy for organizational learning and change and for reinforcing organizational culture. An inter-disciplinary and representative working group on organizational

**Figure 2. Initial results from national researchers focus group (n = 14).**



**Table 1. Statements on organizational culture with which staff agreed most and least.**

Statement
<b>Statements staff agreed with most (ALL GROUPS)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CIAT is aware of the 'rules of the game' that new trends impose on project research and development.</li> <li>CIAT directors promote multi-cultural teamwork to meet of the needs of the centre, its partners and its clients.</li> <li>On their own initiative, employees can contribute ideas, plans and/or projects related to their area of work.</li> <li>CIAT directors respect work-life balance and facilitate alternatives for maintaining this balance.</li> </ul>
<b>Statements staff agreed with least (ALL GROUPS)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Men and women at CIAT are encouraged to identify – from within and outside the centre – needs related to their work.</li> <li>Staff from different cultures and nationalities participate in identifying needs inside and outside the centre.</li> <li>The way in which tasks, procedures and projects are organized stimulates inspired participation from all staff.</li> <li>Communication flows in such a way that both national and international staff understand the impact of their work in the country and in the world.</li> </ul>
<b>Statements women staff agreed with least (WOMEN FOCUS GROUP)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Men and women are offered equal opportunities in the assignment of positions, work, responsibilities and resources.</li> <li>CIAT's managers and administrators treat workers from different countries and cultures equally and give them equal opportunity to participate.</li> <li>CIAT's initiatives to promote an entrepreneurial spirit among staff enable staff to maintain a healthy work-life balance.</li> <li>CIAT's managers and administrators treat men and women equally in their work and personal relationships.</li> </ul>

communications was subsequently appointed by CIAT management to develop a communication strategy and to monitor the action plan. In this regard, the Intranet is a powerful tool for internal communications. The different communication channels should clearly transmit the mission, vision and values of the centre, with senior management as role models in practising these values.

*Senior management should be role models of organizational values.*

*Internal communications are a key strategy for organizational learning and change and for reinforcing organizational culture.*

**Training leaders and harmonizing jobs**

The CGIAR's Strategic Advisory Service for Human Resources conducted a needs assessment for leadership training for first-line, middle and senior management. For the first time, project managers were trained in leadership.

CIAT is moving towards the 'one staff concept' that seeks to eliminate differences stemming from lack of a unified job classification system. As a first step, the system is already being restructured.

**Multi-cultural awareness**

CIAT's human resources staff reviewed the orientation for new employees with particular emphasis on multi-cultural aspects. The G&D Committee produced a multimedia cultural orientation CD introducing CIAT, Cali and Colombia to potential and new employees. The next step is for CIAT's leadership courses to include modules to strengthen staff multi-cultural competencies.

**Gender balance and awareness**

One of CIAT's G&D goals for 2006–2010 is to increase the number of women in senior positions over the next five years. To achieve these goals, CIAT is improving and reinforcing diversity-positive policies and practices in recruitment, work-life balance and other practices for an inclusive workplace. The management team also approved a formal mentoring programme that targets women scientists and professionals.

*Diversity-positive policies and practices build an inclusive workplace.*

**Conclusions and lessons learned**

The initial idea was for a study focused on G&D issues, but CIAT management recommended broadening the topic to organizational culture. This wider perspective enriched the study by bringing in staff perceptions on fundamental issues at CIAT.

Support from an external expert on organizational culture greatly aided the design and implementation of the study, as well as follow-up interventions.

To guarantee success, studies of this nature need an internal 'champion' (an individual or a small group) to take the lead and ensure the process remains on schedule and on target. This helps to maintain momentum, with results presented to staff in a timely manner. At CIAT, the G&D Committee plays the crucial role of planning, monitoring and evaluating improvements in the work environment in close co-ordination with staff committees.

CIAT staff responded positively, providing feedback and suggestions for change. However, meeting attendance was relatively low – evidence of an institutional culture in which issues not directly related to research are disregarded. Nevertheless, staff who attended the feedback meetings openly expressed their perceptions of CIAT's strengths and weaknesses, with common ideas emerging from the different staff groups. The study was also boosted by the active participation of staff committees.

The open and receptive attitude of CIAT's senior management, coupled with their support for interventions based on study findings, had a positive effect on staff, spurring more of them to actively participate in improvements. More staff also responded to the call for voluntary self-nominations as Gender and Diversity Associates at CIAT, a group that will act as change agents in G&D issues at the centre.

*An open attitude on the part of management, coupled with support for interventions, spurred staff to actively participate in improvements.*

For outposted staff, e-mail proved ineffective; a different approach should be identified. The lack of face-to-face discussions with outposted staff, and their limited knowledge of day-to-day operations at headquarters, compromised their participation. It was not possible to draw meaningful conclusions from the results of their virtual participation.

It is necessary therefore to fill the gap in studying the local culture at CGIAR stations outside headquarters. One way would be for centres to set aside resources for regular and comprehensive self-assessments.

*Special measures are needed to secure meaningful feedback from outposted staff.*

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CIAT Gender and Diversity Committee website for women professionals: [www.ciat.cgiar.org/gender\\_diversity/women.htm](http://www.ciat.cgiar.org/gender_diversity/women.htm)

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