

**Meeting of the CGIAR Impact Assessment Focal Points (IAFPs) & the Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA) of the CGIAR Independent Science and Partnership Council
At the Boston Marriott Copley Place, Boston, USA, 29 July 2016**

The *Impact Assessment Focal Point Meeting* was organized by SPIA along with IAFPs of the CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs) and Centers, as a follow up to similar meetings held in the past. The objectives of the meeting, similar to previous meetings, were to:

- (1) Enhance interactions between Centre/CRP IAFPs on adoption and ex post IA related issues Give and receive feedback on Center/CRP *ex post* IA study plans and strategies
- (2) Receive updates from IAFPs on CRP Phase-II adoption/impact assessment and RBM strategy and plans
- (3) Update IAFPs on SIAC activities, external evaluation of SIAC Phase-I, and prospects/plans for SIAC Phase-II
- (4) Discuss areas of complementarities and overlap between SPIA and other communities of practice (MELIA, ECoP, PIM's COP on technology adoption)

The program agenda, list of participants and individual presentations from CRPs, SIAC collaborators and SPIA can be found here on the CGIAR Impact site <http://impact.cgiar.org/meetings-and-events/iafp-boston-2016>

This is a brief summary of the discussions that took place over the course of the day.

Discussion session 1: The demand for ePIAs in the CRPs

Session description: Reflecting on the CRP presentations thus far i.e., on plans for impact assessments and how they fit into the larger RBM strategy, this session will identify critical drivers for ePIAs in the CRPs as well as the broader CGIAR system. By identifying these drivers and by starting to identify some of the larger issues in delivering credible as well as relevant adoption data and ePIAs, this session will set the stage for the other discussion sessions. The session starts with a presentation of results from the survey conducted by SPIA in 2014 on the use of and need for ePIAs, followed by some reflections by the donors present.

Many of the IAFPs were clear that IAs are aimed at external stakeholders. Impact assessments (IAs) are sometimes used to inform priorities and reallocate funding, but with considerable variation across the group of centers / CRPs. At IFPRI, there is a demand for IAs to feed into the learning process such that an increased focus on capacity building came about as a result of evaluation. At IITA, results are used for advocacy, and investment decisions at programmatic level tend to be determined by other factors. In the case of CIP, there are a few instances where IAs have been used for resource allocation (orange-fleshed sweet potatoes), and in the case of the RTB CRP, the demand for IA is also influenced by the IA background of the CRP Director. A4NH invests in randomized control trials (RCTs) in conducting proof-of-concept research, e.g. on link between bio-fortification and nutrition outcomes. In general, IAFPs opined that Centers request simpler messages from IAs: for instance, how many people have been lifted out of poverty, which may be the most powerful indicator there is, yet one of the hardest to rigorously measure. IAFPs also recognize that investment decisions by donors are not directly driven by IAs.

Ruben Echeverría (Director-General, CIAT) echoed some of these views by noting that ePIAs have not helped prioritized too much as one needs *ex-ante* studies as well. While there is still an indirect influential role, there is huge heterogeneity in how Centers/CRPs approach this. *Ex-post* IAs could help prioritize if the message is taken to the donors.

Richard Caldwell (BMGF) used the example of IRRI-STRASA to showcase how a business case was made by using multiple IA studies and this influenced seed system policy: an impact study led by de Janvry and team illustrated the economic gains from adoption of flood-tolerant varieties and how it changed farmer behavior in non-flooded years. A parallel study on adoption showed how these varieties were being adopted in areas that do not flood at a rate five-times higher than the for flood-prone areas. This suggests that the seed system is inefficient such that welfare gains would be higher if the distribution were better targeted, but also that the variety performs well even under non-flood conditions.

In terms of funding for IAs and investments in baselines, IAs (currently) tend to be opportunistic, because once salaries are accounted for, there is very little operational funding for impact assessments. And the issue with baselines is not that they are not put in place, but that they are project based and rarely representative of a policy-relevant scale, and sometimes the data are not used. Staff attrition also affects baselines: when a new cohort of researchers take over, they may not find the data helpful or the data collection process may be poorly documented so it is hard for them to understand how much the data should be trusted.

While the rigor revolution (SPIA, 2010) in impact assessments is recognized and there is an increase in the number of IAs, rigorous at that (see for instance, <http://blogs.3ieimpact.org/is-impact-evaluation-still-on-the-rise/>), there is a parallel trend where greater investment in communications may be used to try and persuade donors of the efficacy of specific agricultural research outputs, and this outcompetes using that money for carrying investments in impact assessments (see Pritchett, 2002). There was some discussion of this in the context of the CGIAR, and SPIA recognizes that there might be direct pressure from DGs and CRP Directors, communications teams or even some of the scientists that the quantitative estimates from rigorous IAs are not 'big enough'. This, in turn, makes it more challenging for IAFPs to defend the focus on rigor and credibility of findings. The trend to investment in communications is seen in the budgetary allocations of CRP proposals (submitted for Phase II).

Discussion session 2/3: Structural challenges and constraints to ePIAs/ Resources and support for high quality ePIAs

Session description: Following the session 1, this discussion will first reflect on the structural challenges and constraints to ePIAs, and then identify the broader resource/support needs of the CRPs in collecting adoption data and conducting ePIAs. Structural challenges may relate to, but not be limited to, competition for funding, the nature of funding (W1/W2/W3/bilateral), the emphasis on MEL versus IA, management and reporting, etc. Resource needs may span funding support, public goods (w.r.t. data collection, data management and curation, indicators or sample questionnaires, methods, ethics committee, quality control etc.), capacity development, and advocacy and communications. It will then reflect on the role SPIA could play with respect to these functions.

SPIA Chair (Doug Gollin) began the discussions by talking about the CGIAR ePIA context, and inviting responses. SPIA has assumed that the bulk of the IA-related work occurs in the Centers, and that relative to the size of the system, SPIA is small. There is also a sense that the vast majority of IAs are project level and often short-term. There appears to be relatively little systematic collection of adoption data at Centers and CRPs (over and above the DIIVA, TRIVSA and SIAC related efforts). It is recognized that this is influenced by structural changes in funding (W3/bilateral drive ePIAs), and that there is a struggle to allocate core budget for IA work. An additional factor is the pressure to deliver data against quantitative impact indicators for which it is almost impossible to report on a rigorous manner with any degree of frequency. The data generated in response to this demand does undermine the credibility of IAs. There was some discussion that this set of demands may be an artefact of being a part of the development

sector and something we have to accept. For SPIA operating in such a context, are there public goods that we can provide, besides advocacy on ePIAs to the donors via ISPC?

Sam Mohanty (CRP-RICE, IRRI) and Ricardo Labarta (CRP-RICE for LAC, CRP-CCAFS, CIAT) stated that funding is the main challenge: while CIAT has core money to maintain minimum staff capacity for IA, half the IA projects are funded through projects. Similarly at IRRI, since staff work at the project level, the focus is on project outputs. In RICE Phase II, they have set aside USD 0.5 million for IAs, but there was no such allocation in Phase I. A project 'tax' was considered to generate ePIA budget, but it is unclear how successful this will be. CIAT's DG thought that asking CRPs to find money to conduct IAs, in a context of constrained funding and the need to raise bilateral, is a hard sell. He added that any push on IA has to be at the Center level – not CRP level – because researchers are Center-affiliated. Aminou Arouna (CRP-RICE for SSA, AfricaRice) emphasized again that project level donors look for clear and simple impact messages, in short timeframes. Speaking to the challenge of prioritization, while assessing the impact of technologies that are mature and widely adopted can be challenging, when the technology has not widely diffused, there is an open question of what impacts one would assess even as scientists continue developing and releasing varieties. Sid Mohan (CRP-FTA, ICRAF) spoke about their strategy of collaborating with NGOs for IAs, given the long-term nature of their work. He added that a majority of natural resource scientists are not interested, per se, in IAs.

In response, Bob Herdt (SPIA member) noted that there seems to be no agreement on what donors want, and there is no evidence that poor or good IAs have a real impact on donor decisions. Julian Alston (SIAC PSC member) noted the importance of finding the right mix between quantity and quality of evaluations – currently, there is a lot of decentralized work, and the total is less than the sum of the parts (including impact of the IAs itself).

Nancy Johnson (CRP-A4NH, IFPRI) thought that data collection and analysis should continue at Centers/CRPs, in closer collaboration with the System Management Board, with the application of a range of methodological approaches (especially theory-based and qualitative). Echeverría added that SPIA should empower and indirectly influence IAFPs, and could communicate better with the DGs perhaps during the regular board meetings. Both Alston and Echeverría liked the idea of levying a 'tax' for IA to ensure long-term (not project based) funding for IAs.

In speaking to the demand for numbers, Guy Hareau (CRP-RTB, CIP) pointed out that the battle has been lost - the quality of ex-ante projections varies widely in the proposals. And since CRPs will be requested for evidence on those numbers at some point in the future, that's something to think about. He added that the M&E system does not include IA staff, even when collaboration is said to be welcome. Marie-Charlotte Buisson (CRP-WLE, IWMI) agreed that the current approach to showing impact is not ideal, but asked if alternatives exist and can be proposed.

In the discussion following the presentations on 'communities of practice', it was recognized that there is a lot of activity led by PIM on technology uptake and foresight, through meetings, collaborations and capacity building. The suggestion was that PIM continue to do such activities, but focus on specific topics. There is a role for broadening the scope of the community to outside of CGIAR – for instance, besides SIAC, BMGF has also funded ATAI and the link would be natural. From the experience of capacity building for IAs at CIP and CIFOR, an argument was made by Virginia Tech (Jeff Alwang) for dedicated core budgets for impact assessments and a strong commitment from the Center leadership (including a vision of what can be learnt from IAs).

Discussions following SIAC Phase-I presentation, and proposals for a (potential) Phase-II

Richard Caldwell encouraged the institutionalization of the work that has occurred in Phase-I, as a part of the normal business of Centers and CRPs. For instance, in case of DNA fingerprinting, while the costs have come down, the cost of seed and leaf collection has remained fairly constant. How does one generate more synergy in the CGIAR to bring down these costs? Herdt suggested that the approach of the first synthesis report should be from macro to micro – that starting with the big picture on agricultural research impacts, we work back down to look at evidence for the micro foundations for such claims.

In response to the proposal for targeted adoption/diffusion data collection in Phase-II, Buisson and Hazell suggested that SPIA needs to start thinking about how the data will be used. IAFPs asked how easy it is to introduce questions in existing surveys (e.g., when there are 12 different technologies in Ethiopia to track), or link up these efforts with Censuses of Agriculture. It was also noted that collecting impact indicators is important because, in the past, technologies have spread without impact on poverty or nutrition. Gollin responded that the assumption is that there would be some follow-up survey, and all data will be made publicly available. SPIA recognizes that there is a need to collect some nutrition data as baseline, and consider impact of CGIAR in the urban areas and the relevant indicators thereof (measures of urban poverty, prices etc.). Similarly, some data on policies and institutions might be needed to understand the enabling environment. However, at minimum, credible adoption data is needed because adoption is a necessary and sufficient condition for impact.