

Foreword

After more than two decades of hiatus agriculture is back on the agenda of donors and governments. Issues of harmonisation, results orientation, mutual accountability and payments for performance have become mantras in development assistance. Placing intended beneficiaries at the centre stage is the new motto. But the articles in this seminal *IDS Bulletin* provide systematic evidence to lay open the widely shared secret among development practitioners that the cupboard of agricultural monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is bare. Agricultural M&E has been weak at best. Where it exists it has concentrated on tools and methods, a narrow focus on project performance ratings and ‘rates of return’ with accountability upwards to donors rather than downwards to the intended beneficiaries of programmes. This *IDS Bulletin* explores the reasons why, providing insights into the genesis, the strengths and weaknesses of the prevailing M&E approaches. It makes a case for a new participatory paradigm for M&E. Its principal message is that beneficiary perspectives and engagement in M&E is smart policy because it can make a positive difference to development outcomes. In appropriate circumstances it can increase relevance of interventions while fostering empowerment, and build capacities all around through learning. The authors note that the human, organisational and capacity challenges of a bottom-up pyramid, with a strong foundation of relevant knowledge, information and upward feedback, are not to be underrated relative to the straight jacket of a logframe. But they provide evidence that despite its simplicity often even the logframe is largely ignored in the course of implementation. The new approach, the authors argue, would be inclusiveness of beneficiaries. With a focus on mutual learning by providers of interventions and the intended beneficiaries, successive iterative refinements of programme

design and implementation is all the more necessary in a period of increasing risks and uncertainties facing smallholder agriculture. Why have such approaches not been the norm rather than an exception?

Bottom-up approaches to rural development have been advocated by experts since the 1970s, and were embraced on western university campuses and welcomed by civil society organisations. But they have not been internalised either by international donors or governments. Even when the failed top-down approaches of integrated rural development or the Training and Visit extension of the 1970s and 1980s gave way to community-driven development, the community interventions did not wrestle with the complexities of smallholder agricultural development, focusing instead on small-scale infrastructure provision. Spread of agricultural innovation among thousands of small farm households requires a balancing act between bottom-up technology generation, adaption, and dissemination, and suitable institutions for service delivery, to central stewardship through policies towards secure land rights, agricultural finance, and commodity markets. The authors are not sanguine about the power of ideas related to M&E methods which explain the current state of affairs, nor of the financial, human capital, and methodological advances needed for strong customer feedback. The issues of norms, power relationships, time, costs, and professional and donor recognition in pursuing prevailing methodologies matter. Yet this *IDS Bulletin* provides much food for thought for a different paradigm for monitoring and evaluation, and indeed implicitly for agricultural development.

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