

Reflections on ILAC

(notes of remarks to the ILAC workshop at IFPRI 4 February 03)

Paradigms, Words, Meanings.

We are talking about change which is paradigmatic, in the sense of linked concepts, words, values, methods, behaviours and relationships. Its dimensions are personal, professional and institutional. Part of this is the new context into which we are moving in which power, relationships and networks are more significant and more recognised to be significant. This is reflected in words which have now become common in development, for example the six words – empowerment, partnership, ownership, participation, accountability and transparency, which all imply changes in power and relationships.

ILAC is part of this movement into new space and relationships. It may be a good thing that it is not currently explicitly defined, but is a conjuncture of words – Institutional, Learning, Change. Sustainable livelihoods began like this, as two words put together which then many people developed meanings for. This had the advantage they defined and owned the evolving concepts. The same could happen with ILAC in the CGIAR system.

Other words used as ILAC evolves are important. What should the initiating actors be called? And what should be their roles? Catalysts, facilitators? Even therapists? Action learners has much to recommend it, with action learning as the description of the processes of ILAC. And Action Learning as what it is about.

Wave 2?

As in Wave 1 the overarching goal is reduction of poverty, seeking to achieve this better by learning about how research and dissemination can have bigger and better effects, and how to achieve the personal, professional and institutional changes for this. Building on the experience of the Wave 1 Case Studies, Wave 2 might include these features among others:

- ◆ *Who takes credit?* Initiators not trying to take credit, but seeking to facilitate participatory processes which others take on as their own
- ◆ *Action learning.* Making this explicit, and linking with action learning experience and practices
- ◆ *Inclusive stakeholders/participants.* Involving an inclusive range of stakeholders and participants from the beginning, including scientists, farmers, poor people, managers and diverse other actors
- ◆ *Lead time.* Allowing for long enough lead times. Funders could be a problem here, wanting to go too fast. Evolving and negotiating objectives, approach and methods, and assuring joint ownership, all take time. Those who take part in the research should have the opportunity to make it their own. It is not just a question of handing

over the stick. It is more a matter of jointly evolving the stick which is then held and used by the researchers

- ◆ *Participatory approaches and methods.* Using participatory methods, as in wave 1, but going further, with more flexibility. This might include making more use of participatory methods to generate numbers. There was some of this in Wave 1. There is often scope for replacing questionnaires with participatory methods

Learning and Changing

Learning and changing could now cover some or all of the following shifts and activities which could be components of Wave 2:

- ◆ *Retrospectives.* Retrospective reflection and analysis on how technologies were evolved, what influenced perceptions, priorities and decisions, and what lessons can be learnt for the future (also for some of Wave 1)
- ◆ *Monitoring.* Focus on monitoring, supporting a continuous process of learning and changing, rather than evaluation with its implications of assessment which is ex post
- ◆ *Reflective retreats* – making time for these
- ◆ *Participatory review and reflections* (similar to ActionAid's ALPS – Accountability, Learning and Planning System) in which stakeholders meet, review what has happened, learn from that, and plan for the next steps, and reports are minimal, and notes largely confined to what has been learnt
- ◆ *Learning opportunities.* Learning from leads and directions which have not proved fruitful, turning failures into learning successes, describing and treating them as “learning opportunities” (BP's term), and rewarding them when shared with others [I recollect, for example, a scientist who had worked in Northern Nigeria on cotton saying heroically that he had wasted 20 years of his life breeding for high yield at the best time for planting, when farmers always planted their cotton “late”, after they had got their food crops in. This was a big learning also for others]
- ◆ *Field living experiences.* Living with farmers and poor people, even for a fairly short time, can be transformative.
- ◆ *Reflective diaries* kept throughout the process
- ◆ *Writeshops* (as developed by IIRR in the Philippines), in which participants (for example scientists who have been involved in developing a technology) go into a brief retreat to write up the experience

HYMs: Comparative Advantage and Responsibility of the CGIAR?

The idea here is that the prestige of the CGIAR gives it a comparative advantage or responsibility in the development and spread of high-yielding methodologies (HYMs). . This includes methodologies for ILAC. This could include making tacit knowledge explicit. A big spinoff from ILAC-related research could be its adoption, adjustment and refinement by NARSs, not just by IARCs. The Centres could “make the narrative of ILAC legitimate”. The scale of impact of ILAC could thus be multiplied. The long-term impacts on poverty could be very significant.

A Community of Practice

People who are minorities in organisations can come together and communicate as informal communities of practice. The original Farmer First conference in 1987 (co-funded by Rockefeller) was like this. Some 50 natural and social scientists who were isolated or minorities in their organisations came together and met and gained encouragement from kindred spirits. Is the situation with ILAC similar? That was the sense at the Costa Rica conference, where there was almost a parallel, minority, stream of papers and concerns on the lines of ILAC.

The potential here is for mutual support and exchanges, learning from and helping one another in different Centres.

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