

Overview: Getting a More Balanced View of What is Working in Agriculture to Reduce Hunger

Yvonne Pinto

Abstract This article suggests that to understand better what is working in agriculture in order to reduce hunger, a strengthening and transformation of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) in agricultural research and development is needed. It presents the Agricultural Learning and Impacts Network (ALINe) as the initiative that has commissioned this *IDS Bulletin*, reflecting aspects of the current status and role of M&E, how it can be strengthened and ultimately transformed, and some of the reasons for why such change is possible. ALINe argues that asking farmers about their priorities, and what is and is not working and embedding this data into performance management systems is vital for improving accountability, value for money and the impact of agricultural development on people's lives. The article also introduces the other articles in this collection and commentaries on them by Southern practitioners and specialists.

1 Introduction

The food price spike of 2007/8 led to food riots, civil unrest and drove a further 100 million people into hunger. But this is an ongoing crisis that, with business as usual, is likely to get worse before it gets better. At the time of going to press, global food prices have once again struck a chord with the international media. Recent reports forecast their rise by as much as 40 per cent over the coming decade with concurrent rises in hunger and food insecurity (OCED-FAO 2010). In June of this year farm commodity prices had fallen from their record peaks of 2008 but were still on a steady increase and were unlikely to drop back to the average levels of the past decade. By early August, following extreme weather events in Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, the price of wheat had risen by 50 per cent (Smale 2010) to its highest level in 37 years. Within a fortnight, the Russian Administration, confronted by a severe drought created further uncertainty in the global commodity market by banning grain exports for the rest of the year. Half a dozen articles have appeared in the popular press signalling that manufacturers and retailers will face passing on the increased cost to their customers but the real impact of these increases are likely to be in

developing countries depending on imports to meet their food security needs. Several articles have suggested means of managing this more effectively at the level of commodity markets (von Braun 2010).

Improving the productivity of agriculture is key to producing more food to consume and more income to purchase more and better food. In developing countries 65–70 per cent of the labour force is employed in agriculture, and contributes an average of 32 per cent of GDP providing the major share of income for the rural poor (World Bank 2007). These statistics translated into a sub-Saharan African (SSA) context illustrate that among 200 million people, agriculture employs 62 per cent of the population (excluding South Africa) and generates 27 per cent of GDP (FAO 2006; World Bank 2006; Staatz and Dembele 2007).

In Africa there are approximately 33 million farms with those less than two hectares representing 80 per cent of all farms (Nayagets 2005). There are varying reports of the share of production that comes from small farms, some as high as 90 per cent (Wiggins 2009).

Many African countries are characterised by highly variable domestic production, limited tradability of food staples and limited reserves to purchase their food needs through imports. In this context agricultural production is critically important to food security. Many countries in SSA undergo recurrent uncertainty due to food emergencies and food aid; and make them less dependent on expensive food imports (World Bank 2008).

These statistics reinforce the argument that agriculture in its broadest sense is essential to growth and to reducing poverty and food insecurity and that a productivity revolution in smallholder farming – and concurrently in the capacity of ordinary smallholder farmers – will be required to make this a reality.

Whilst there is a sound rationale to encourage appropriate investment in agricultural development (and indeed a better functioning trading system to get food where it is needed) more considered and grounded intelligence is necessary to understand how best to do this in each of the thousands of contexts in which smallholder agriculture thrives.

2 This *IDS Bulletin*

The articles in this *IDS Bulletin* were commissioned by the Agricultural Learning and Impacts Network (ALINe) from a series of researchers and practitioners. ALINe (www.aline.org.uk) is an initiative funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation based at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS), working in close partnership with Keystone Accountability. ALINe argues that systematically asking farmers about their priorities, and what is and is not working is vital to getting sustainable and equitable improvements in agricultural productivity. Working hand in hand with implementers and funders, ALINe believes that embedding the resulting data in performance management systems can drive improvements in agricultural development investments by reconciling accountability to donors with accountability to intended beneficiaries. These systematic people-centred inquiries will help fix the broken feedback loop in agricultural development to improve its impact on people's lives and ensure greater value for money for investors.

The articles and the invited commentaries reflect on the current status and role of monitoring and

evaluation (M&E) within the agricultural research and development system and how it can be strengthened and ultimately transformed. The current austerity era has generated even more support for an aid effectiveness agenda that places emphasis on mutual accountabilities, aid ownership, results, evidence and alignment between the priorities of beneficiaries and donors. But the gap between this rhetoric and reality persists with little clarity on how best to close it. This *IDS Bulletin* argues that 'people-centred performance measurement' will help.

What we are suggesting – a strengthening and transformation of M&E in agriculture – will not be easy. Vested interests, path dependency and habit have to be challenged. Given the absence of conclusive evidence that people-centred performance measurement does indeed raise the impact of agricultural investments on poverty and hunger, are there grounds for thinking this is more than academic wishful thinking?

There are some grounds for optimism. First, we are living in an era that demands accountability to agricultural stakeholders – in donor and recipient countries – and also impact. As we argue in this *IDS Bulletin*, systematic farmer feedback, allied to existing measurement systems can square this seemingly inflexible circle. Second, new mobile technologies are making all sorts of collective capabilities a growing possibility. Third, there are new investors in agriculture – from the foundations and the emerging economics – and the hope is that they challenge rather than reinforce the status quo. Fourth, the increased emphasis on monitoring and impact is mobilising the research community to give M&E a higher status with the resulting possibilities for understanding how to design incentives, institutions and tools that make people-centred performance measurement an everyday reality. Finally, many reform processes are under way within agriculture – the CGIAR (Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research) revamp, the US Government's Feed the Future initiative, the AU (African Union) commitments to the 22 African countries that have currently signed CAADP (Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme) compacts to increase their budgetary commitments to agriculture and civil society's increasing advocacy for citizen voice.¹

Certainly it will take leadership from donors, practitioners, civil society and researchers to

realise these possibilities, but these possibilities reflect a mix of opportunities that have not previously existed.

3 Commissioned articles

This *IDS Bulletin* leads with a steady state analysis of M&E in agriculture, building on a survey of practitioners conducted by ALiNe. In ‘The Sorry State of M&E in Agriculture: Can People-centred Approaches Help?’, Haddad *et al.* argue that if the multiple purposes of M&E were recognised and pursued it would help align the incentives of funders, implementers, M&E service providers and intended beneficiaries to increase the impacts of agriculture on hunger and poverty. They also suggest that agricultural development’s features such as multiple goals, long and uncertain causal chains, a high level of risk and an inability of beneficiaries to become organised to engage more effectively make this alignment even more imperative. The authors argue that a failure to identify and capture the multiple benefits of investments in M&E, the lack of incentives to try and the relatively closed M&E world conspire to create a system where there is little pressure to improve performance through monitoring, learning and evaluation. They argue that multiple accountabilities can be balanced by (a) soliciting multiple perspectives on programme design, implementation and evaluation, (b) actively focusing on creating individual and organisational incentives to underpin this people-centred learning, and (c) opening up the world of agricultural M&E to greater scrutiny from multiple perspectives with learning across disciplines and fields which will provide the elements of a feasible roadmap for the future. Zenda Ofir provides a commentary on the article, arguing that while the case for people-centred M&E is convincing, what is needed to make a real difference is a stronger focus on larger systems within and beyond agriculture, novel practices and innovation in M&E.

Lucas and Longhurst in their article ‘Evaluation: Why, for Whom and How?’ take an analytical view of what agriculture can learn about evaluation from a neighbouring field, health. From such a perspective they present a digestible synthesis of the history of different methods and approaches and highlight some of the polar debates in the M&E world. They end by signalling the potential for learning in both

directions. Jacobs *et al.* in their article ‘Three Approaches to Monitoring: Feedback Systems, Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation and Logical Frameworks’ compare the key attributes, strengths and weaknesses of three different approaches to monitoring and evaluation and feedback systems. The authors suggest that feedback systems, whilst at an early stage in their development, build on a rich heritage of participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) and are compatible with logframes, linking these two and providing a more innovative, inclusive and equitable approach to accountability. Chambers in his article ‘A Revolution Whose Time Has Come? The Win-Win of Quantitative Participatory Approaches and Methods’ explores quantitative participatory methods with gains to farmers through their own analysis, action and voice and to others such as scientists and implementers through timely information and its insights. Building on qualitative and quantitative approaches, the article by Jacobs, ‘Creating the Missing Feedback Loop’, describes how agencies can implement these systems to build their learning through systematic engagement with beneficiaries. Jacobs uses leading examples to highlight how to address ethical, practical and managerial issues and suggests the magic in the mix is linking participatory processes to management systems for improved performance.

Bonbright and Power in their article ‘Private Sector Metrics Contributions to Social Change: Customer Satisfaction Meets Agriculture Development’ illustrate the risks of bold supply side-only interventions driven by technological ingenuity or innovation. They support their arguments by highlighting accountability to intended beneficiaries. Drawing on a history of business management approaches to customer satisfaction they highlight the paradigm whereby demand-driven competition has driven businesses in a relentless process of performance management for survival. They highlight the opportunities that technology offers to drive down the costs of collecting viable, quantitative data from farmers to prime a potential new accountability to farmers. Edward Mabaya comments on this article, highlighting additional lessons to be learned from the private sector, but also urges a note of caution about the differences between the private business world and the world of agricultural development.

The next set of articles builds on the theme of accountability and explores elements of agricultural development which when combined with the opportunity to scale may result in a series of risks and trade-offs that need to be managed, particularly as the investments seek to transform the lives of large numbers of people. Some project immersion visits and reviews of existing project documents helped to develop the insights presented in these articles.

The first article, 'Monitoring and Evaluating Agricultural Science and Technology Projects: Theories, Practices and Problems' by Millstone *et al.*, seeks to build constructively on the mixed track record in agricultural research projects in diminishing poverty amongst the poorest groups. The authors review some of the inherent tradeoffs generated by the imperative to demonstrate poverty impacts and the long gestation periods of most science and technology investments in agriculture. The article goes on to review a series of different institutional approaches to enable a better alignment of technology developers and technology users to maximise poverty and hunger impacts. Devereux and Longhurst in their article 'Incorporating Seasonality into Agricultural Project Design and Learning' investigate the circumstances under which seasonality creates constraints for farmers and suggest some changes to project design that can help small farmers to better manage cycles in rainfall, production and labour requirements and food prices. Sabates-Wheeler *et al.* examine 'Context-specific and Project-induced Risk: Designing Projects for Promoting Resilient Livelihoods' and move beyond production, commodity and technology risk to look more broadly at the types of unintended risks that projects can generate. Using a case study approach and immersion visits they have evaluated the extent to which agricultural interventions are cognisant of risks facing farm households and whether the intervention changes the risk profile to farmers and improves or constrains their ability to manage these risks. They suggest some approaches to identify and minimise these unintended risks. Kabeer's article highlights the relationship between 'Women's Empowerment, Development Interventions and the Management of Information Flows'. She carefully reviews projects and has undertaken immersion visits of specific case studies of the Bill

& Melinda Gates Foundation agricultural portfolio to highlight the very great care required to listen to the most marginalised voices that are particularly distant from influential networks. Oswald and Taylor in their article 'A Learning Approach to Monitoring and Evaluation' draw on literatures within the M&E and organisational learning paradigms to draw lessons to support improved organisational performance. They highlight the commonalities and differences between learning or non-learning organisations and highlight the incentives that can help link organisational learning to M&E. They suggest some clear elements required to support this most effectively within and between agricultural development actors. Feinstein gives a Latin American perspective on this article, placing particular emphasis on the role of trust in creating an enabling environment and its relationship to perceived credibility, the need to treat monitoring and evaluation as distinct concepts and barriers to the use of M&E as a source of learning and suggestions to overcome them.

Finally coming full circle, within the current climate of high wheat prices and the aftermath of the financial crisis, Sumner *et al.* provide insights in their article 'Does Research Reduce Poverty? Assessing the Impacts of Policy-oriented Research in Agriculture' on assessing the welfare impacts of agricultural research. They illustrate the complexity of causal chains and attribution relationships inherent in policy research but they also highlight the possibility of evaluating those impacts. As in most other interventions, the key is to identify the theory of change and the key stakeholders involved and to then find appropriate indicators while appreciating the significant time lags between the policy research and any subsequent welfare effects. Raghav Gaiha and Shantanu Mathur respond to this article, arguing that in covering large ground, Sumner *et al.* lose sight of some key issues, including the importance of reprioritising agricultural research, the role of the private sector, the need to expand technology and the key incentives required to drive a responsive system in the long-term.

I hope you enjoy the collection of articles in this *IDS Bulletin* and the Editors welcome feedback and comments on them.

Note

- 1 The recent Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD) raised awareness for results for poor communities and wider partnerships strongly advocating

References

- FAO (2006) *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2006*, Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization
- Lele, U.; Pretty, J.; Terry, E.; Trigo, E. and Klousia, M. (2010) *What Change is Needed, Why and How?*, Executive Summary of Global Authors Team Report commissioned by the Global Forum on International Agricultural Research (GFAR) as an input into the Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD) held in Montpellier, France, 28–31 March
- Nayagets, O. (2005) 'Small Farms: Current Status and Key Trends', Information Brief prepared for the Future of Small Farms Research Workshop, Wye College, 26–29 June
- OECD-FAO (2010) *Agricultural Outlook 2010–2019*, OECD Publishing, www.agri-outlook.org (accessed 27 August 2010)
- Smale, W. (2010) *Should We be Concerned About High Wheat Prices?*, BBC, 5 August 2010, available www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-10866508 (accessed 27 August 2010)
- Staatz, J. and Dembele, N.N. (2007) *Agriculture for Development in Sub-Saharan Africa*, background paper prepared for the World Development Report 2008
- von Braun, J. (2010) 'Time to Regulate Volatile Food Markets', *Financial Times*, 9 August 2010, www.ft.com/cms/s/0/d4e78538-a3e2-11df-9e3a-00144feabdc0.html (accessed 27 August 2010)
- Wiggins, S. (2009) *Can the Smallholder Model Deliver Poverty Reduction and Food Security for a Rapidly Growing Population in Africa?*, ODI paper used for FAO Expert Meeting on How to Feed the World in 2050, 24–26 June
- World Bank (2008) *World Development Report 2008: Agriculture for Development*, Washington DC: World Bank
- World Bank (2007) *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation*, Washington DC: World Bank
- World Bank (2006) *Africa Development Indicators 2006*, Washington DC: World Bank

that '... a change is needed in the incentive structures in the national and international research community to deliver impacts for the poor. ... Systems need to be more accountable to their beneficiaries.' (Lele *et al.* 2010: xii).