RESEARCH PROGRAM ON Agriculture for Nutrition and Health

Led by IFPRI

Use of research by international NGOs working on agriculture and nutrition: Current practices and opportunities for enhancing research uptake and impact

A4NH NOTE | DECEMBER 2015

Within the development community, large international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) constitute an important block of actors engaged in delivering training, goods, and services aimed at improving agriculture-based livelihoods and the nutritional status of households engaged in small-scale agriculture. The international agricultural research community would like to ensure that the design, conduct, and presentation of its research on nutrition-sensitive agriculture and integrated agriculture and nutrition programming are responsive to the felt needs of INGOs, and that INGOs are picking up and using the results to improve the nutritional impact of their agricultural activities in the field.

To this end, the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH), led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), contracted TANGO International to help formulate a theory of change (ToC) for how research results, in particular the results of program evaluations, would contribute to the achievement of development outcomes and impacts—IDOs and SLOs in the language of the CGIAR results framework—through their uptake and use by NGOs and other program implementers. To inform the ToC, specifically the key assumptions, risks and constraints, TANGO conducted a study, including online surveys and purposive interviews, on use of research results and evaluation findings by large INGOs. This A4NH Note summarizes the findings of that study.

METHODOLOGY

The study was comprised of an online survey and virtual and in-person interviews conducted in mid-2014. Both data collection methods were designed to solicit feedback from potential users of A4NH research in the INGO community on how their organizations currently access and use research, and their thoughts on how to improve the link between research and practice.

The survey consisted of 47 multiple-choice and open-ended questions and was administered using the Food Security and Nutrition (FSN) network listserv. For the semi-structured interviews, a list of 24 INGOs was drawn up using specific criteria and potential informants working in these organizations were contacted. As interviews progressed, additional informants were added by snowball method.

Profile of respondents

There were a total of 62 responses to the survey from individuals belonging to 39 different organizations working in 29 different countries. 41 of the 62 respondents were working for an INGO and about three-fifths of them were based in a regional, country or field office. A third of the respondents were with their organizations for more than 5 years. The respondents were performing multiple job functions but most were providing technical support, were program managers or were responsible for monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and research.

Additionally, 23 current staff members from 12 unique INGOs were interviewed, most of them working in their organizations headquarters. This was partly due to the referrals received by the study team and partly due to ease of accessibility. A breakdown of the affiliation and location of respondents can be found in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

TABLE 1: Affiliation of survey respondents

Type of organization	# of respondents	# of organizations
Non-profit NGOs	41	20
Private sector development practitioners	5	3
Research institutions	6	6
Universities	1	1
Government aid agencies	4	4
UN agencies	3	3
Uncategorized due to lack of sufficient information	2	2
TOTAL	**62**	**39**

Demand for evidence-based decisionmaking

As an implementer, "the research side is gaining huge momentum. Partnerships used to be with fellow NGOs, but in the last five years, it's been more partnerships with NGOs, plus one research partner."

- INGO survey respondent, 2014

TABLE 2: Location of survey respondents		
Location	**% of respondents**	**# of countries**
East and Southern Africa	26%	10
United States	29%	1
West and Central Africa	10%	5
South and Southeast Asia	15%	6
Europe	13%	5
Caribbean	3%	1
North Africa	2%	1
Not stated	3%	-
TOTAL	**N = 62**	**29**

FINDINGS

Current Practice and Views of INGOs on Integrated Agriculture and Nutrition Programming

Pick-up of A4NH messages. There has already been considerable pick-up by INGOs of IFPRI's research messages on the integration of agriculture with nutrition. Donor preference is universally perceived as a powerful driver in shaping INGO approaches to agriculture and nutrition, with the United States government (USG) Feed the Future initiative and Food for Peace program featuring prominently. Another important influence on pick up of research results on agriculture and nutrition programming by INGOs has been the presence of champions in the organization, usually senior managers and/or technical advisors. Results of internal M&E and filtering of information disseminated through external research and advocacy platforms have also played a part, though to lesser extent. There is a general interest in scientific literature and research, and IFPRI is a recognized and valued brand.

Trend toward greater integration across sectors. Over the past five years there has been a trend towards greater integration across sectors in development work in general. Integrated programs are giving higher priority to nutrition, and new program emphases have emerged on water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), on value chains linking agriculture to markets, and on intra-household dynamics and gender roles.

Adaptation of organizational structures and methods of work. A number of INGOs are experimenting with new organizational structures and methods of work in order to implement integration more effectively than in the past. Training individual community workers to deliver messages and provide training for multiple sectors is being tried by several INGOs. It is hoped that this might help them break away from the past practice of 'siloing' multi-sector programs according to the technical specialties involved, and reduce inefficiencies caused by placing too many community workers with unique technical responsibilities in the same local areas.

Concerns about lack of evidence for integrated agriculture and nutrition programming. INGO awareness of the need for evidence comes across quite clearly in interviews. Many in the INGO community feel that despite the pick-up at the conceptual level, solid evidence to support nutrition-sensitive agriculture or integrated agriculture-nutrition programming is lacking. They worry that significant human and financial resources may be misdirected. Incorporating innovation, even when there is research behind it, is a risk – both for INGO staff, and for the communities the innovation is intended to benefit. Most INGOs are risk-averse and would prefer to stick with 'tried and true' approaches until there is a solid body of evidence to support something new. Many feel that INGOs should not be asked to operationalize a new approach until it has been proven to be effective, unless specific funding is provided for testing it. There are exceptions, however. Some see a window of opportunity to try out new ideas about integrating agriculture and nutrition on their own, since donors are not yet at a point where they can say they know what has worked and what hasn't.

> *"There is a lot of research about the agriculture-nutrition linkage but nothing on impact, which is astounding."*
>
> • INGO survey respondent, 2014

Behavior change as a precondition for success. Several point out that best practices for achieving satisfactory nutritional outcomes have been known for some time, and are currently required by most USG programs such as the Food for Peace programs. Examples include early breastfeeding, maternal care, WASH, preventing malnutrition in children under two (PM2A), 1000 Days, conservation agriculture and integrated pest management. In their view, what is lacking is not greater contribution from agriculture, but rather more concentration on developing and applying techniques for changing behaviors such that these known best practices would become the new local norm.

Need for longer program and project timeframes. Many INGO personnel stress that significant impacts cannot be expected within the 2 to 5-year timeframes of most donor-funded projects, nor can impacts be measured within these timeframes. They see donors as becoming increasingly aware of this, but are pessimistic about their being able to change.

Influences on pick-up of research by INGOs

Trend toward evidence-based programming. In the face of tightening budgetary constraints and continuing food insecurity

and humanitarian crises, donors increasingly demand that their investments be shown to have the desired impact. This has led to a drive for more evidence-based decision-making, though not always to a concomitant increase in the amount of resources provided to fund internal evaluative research or promote access to external research by implementing INGOs.

Channels used to access research. A wide variety of channels are used by INGOs to keep abreast of latest information about research results that demonstrate positive impact of innovative technologies and best practices. Those most frequently used include:

- Development community networks,
- Technical literature,
- Internet searches,
- Informal personal networks, and
- External conferences, workshops, and seminars.

Reliance on web-based sources of information. Internet-based communities of practice (COPS) are particularly important mechanisms for networking among development practitioners with a common area of interest such as agriculture or nutrition, as are web platforms for knowledge-sharing. Altogether, 23 COPS, networks or information platforms were mentioned by name as ones on which INGOs rely, and there are likely many others. Websites of NGOs, academic and research institutions, and UN agencies are frequently consulted.

Importance of trusted messengers. Informal personal networks also ranked very high as sources of reliable information. Information that is received from a trusted messenger or through face-to-face encounters with individuals having personal experience with a new technology or practice is much more likely to be picked up and applied without much scrutiny than information from other sources. Often, it takes just one key staff member to pick up a new piece of information and become a champion for that innovation within the organization in order for the innovation to be adopted.

> *"A lot of literature exists on the use of mobile technologies in health and agriculture. However, the pathway by which we really start to pay attention to this literature is when we meet someone – say at a conference or meeting – who tells us they have actually used this technology: this is how they did it, these were their results."*
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> • INGO survey respondent, 2014

Community worker educates a mother in Nepal. (V.Caldas. JHU-CCP c/o Photoshare)

Critical role of technical advisors. Technical advisors, especially at headquarters level, are significant access points through which research enters into organizational discourse. They are the staff members primarily responsible for staying current with outside research, and for filtering, translating and disseminating findings of interest within their organizations. The technical advisor is one of the main organizational representatives who is backed with resources to attend conferences, workshops and networking events related to their fields of specialization. Organizations that employ technical staff are likely to pick up and try to use new findings from research on their own initiative, whereas organizations that do not do so are more likely either just to stick with tried and true models for activities that they have traditionally implemented, or to rely on donors to determine what research results to pick up and apply.

Culture of learning within the INGO. The philosophy and structure that an organization develops to promote staff learning are critical to moving research from its entry points into the organization's internal discourse in a meaningful way. Some INGOs actively promote a culture of learning and others are attempting to do more. The most common incentives offered for staff development include: (i) encouragement to participate in online forums or webinars, (ii) subsidized attendance at conferences and workshops, and (iii) encouragement to subscribe to listservs or institutional mailing lists. Time constraints are a factor that limits the ability of staff members in some organizations to take full advantage of the opportunities on offer. Also, not all staff members are equally qualified to benefit from participation in conferences and learning events. If such opportunities are offered to all staff, special efforts have to be made to ensure that learning takes place and is shared with others in meaningful ways after the event.

Investment in knowledge management systems. Some INGOs show a strong interest in promoting a culture of learning and using research to improve programming, others clearly do not. This interest is reflected in the knowledge management systems and tools that they employ to disseminate information and encourage learning within the organization. For some, efforts are undertaken without an explicit overarching knowledge management strategy, and are limited to distribution of information (e.g., research reports, statistics) via email circulars, internal listservs, or internal COPs organized and managed by a technical advisor. These email mechanisms may function as simple distribution channels, but some benefit from more active engagement of COP members, e.g., whereby staff post questions and comments on current topics of program interest and there is a moderator role. . Features of more developed knowledge management systems include intranet Web platforms, virtual meetings or trainings, and online resource repositories maintained by the INGO. The more sophisticated systems tend to have dedicated staff and may also have research and development arms that manage internal research and collaborative research partnerships, and promote application of relevant results.

INGO involvement in research

INGO experience with research institutions and research consultants. Most INGOs implementing agriculture and nutrition projects have used the services of research institutions or universities and/or commissioned individual research consultants to fulfill a range of advisory functions such as on project design, performance measurement, project monitoring, impact evaluation, or operational research. Academic research institutions also seek out collaborative partnerships with them because projects implemented by INGOs provide a platform for testing and promoting innovations that they are developing.

INGOs report that they benefit from the methodological rigor that researchers bring to the table, from the learning they gain from research and evaluation findings, and at times from capacity building, if their staff are afforded opportunities to participate actively in research design, implementation, and analysis. Nevertheless, INGOs also report numerous constraints that prevent collaborative research partnerships from being as beneficial and effective as they would like.

The cultural divide between researchers and practitioners. The most binding constraint to collaborative research is the cultural divide that separates the research and INGO communities. Cultural differences manifest in terms of: (i) different perceived interests of researchers and practitioners (publication in peer-reviewed journals versus short-term availability and use of research data, findings, and recommendations), (ii) communication styles and (iii) the extent to which researchers and INGOs seek consultative relationships for conducting research (little interest in genuine consultation with INGO partners versus strong desire for more consultative relationship with research community).

Other constraints to effective collaborative research. These include: cost considerations, conflicts over budgetary control, lack of INGO involvement in the formulation of study questions and the nature and number of indicators for which data will be collected, need for contextualization and irrelevance of research conducted in highly controlled environments, difficulty of setting up randomized controls for rigorous quantitative research, timing and duration of the research, and data ownership and access

Making collaborative research more mutually beneficial and effective. In order for collaborative research to be effective, there needs to be increased dialogue between researchers and practitioners during design, analysis, and follow-up stages. There may be a need for facilitation of the dialogue and coordination of the relationship between researchers and INGOs at all stages. While the weak intersection and communication between the two worlds is a cause for concern, nevertheless there is increasing recognition, at least by INGOs, that researchers and practitioners need each other and the feeling that they are, over time, improving the quality of their partnerships, to mutual benefit.

> *"It would be nice to have a general theory on how to program, in all contexts. However, keep in mind that project design is an art: it will not become a science. As time goes on, develop a middle-range theory that shows the program in different contexts – this is where science informs the art of project design."*
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> • INGO survey respondent, 2014

Operationalizing research results

Purposes for which INGOs use evidence-based information. Most INGOs use current information about innovative technologies, best practices, and lessons learned from field experience for identifying innovations they may apply or for validating existing practices. This information may be derived from formal M&E systems or from more informal information-gathering mechanisms such as progress reports, field visits and internal staff meetings involving both HQ and field staff.

Who operationalizes research results and when. Senior managers, with support from technical advisors, and program and field office managers, take the decisions required to adopt an innovative technology or new service delivery method that research has demonstrated to be effective. Most often this occurs when opportunity or necessity call for a decision about what to

do next, most commonly at the proposal development stage. At such times, there is a flurry of activity and attempts are made to incorporate new research results. Although it would be preferable to begin thinking about how to operationalize research at an earlier stage, time constraints for INGO staff often prevent this.

Importance of operational guidelines. INGOs may use technical specialists to present research in a proposal, but many would welcome help from researchers with writing about it, with telling donors how to fund it. This help can take the form of a toolkit, for example, such as the one produced by IFPRI's Gender, Agriculture, and Assets Project (GAAP), which was cited as a model of how to do this.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the challenges, more INGO participation in collaborative research is generally regarded as valuable. INGOs need to be involved at all stages of the research (design, implementation, analysis and follow-up), and they need to be given credit for their inputs. Building the capacity of INGO staff to understand what the research entails and how to use results, should be an integral part of the collaborative process. Researchers also need to pay more attention to the funding cycles of INGOs so that the research can be embedded in program design and completed within the life of a funded program.

More proactive participation of researchers in conferences, communities of practice and online forums of INGOs would do a great deal to help bridge the cultural divide that currently separates them from the world of practitioners. The research community should be represented by individuals who can communicate research questions, methods and results in non-technical language that captures and holds the attention of the target audience, and these individuals should participate actively in workshops, seminars, and online discussions – listening and learning from what INGOs have to say as well as sharing what research has to offer. Operational and cost implications need to be spelled out clearly when reporting research results, and the messages need to be shared with funding communities as well as with INGO staff.

For further reading, please see:

TANGO International (2015): "Use of research by international NGOs working on agriculture and nutrition: Current practices and opportunities for enhancing research uptake and impact", Washington D.C., CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH).

M. Yousuf Tushar/WorldFish

"Now, we are starting to see donors pushing for evaluation policies. They are asking for rigorous research, for theories of change in all programs, for hypothesis testing, for proper sampling and analysis. If these are not in place, results do not qualify as evidence."

- INGO survey respondent, 2014

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