Monitoring and Evaluation in the Research Into Use Program

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SYNOPSIS

The Research Into Use (RIU) program, designed with an innovation systems perspective, emphasized strengthening networks and partnerships and also gave prominence to private sector and enterprise perspectives to drive research into use. The program pursued explicit learning objectives, including drawing key policy lessons about better strategies for putting agricultural research into use. In RIU, the challenge for M&E lay in the need to track developmental as well as institutional outcomes and the limited experience, confidence, and consensus in the use of methods that could address those two outcomes together. A key lesson from RIU's experience with M&E is that it is critical to maintain the distinction between monitoring and evaluation and to separate the timing and responsibilities for these two functions. Monitoring progress toward institutional and developmental targets is challenging; programs should have specific M&E expertise to help design integrated monitoring strategies for each of their interventions (not to collect data for M&E experts to analyze). Donors should be realistic about the type and scale of outcomes likely to be evident in the action-to-impact results chain during the life of an intervention. The final impact needs to be explored after the program has come to an end, especially for a program such as RIU, with its emphasis on achieving impact by stimulating institutional and policy change. Sensitive management of the interaction between evaluators and programs is needed to deal with the tensions between accountability and learning. This point is particularly important for innovation system interventions, because theories of change are multidimensional, evolve, and are often difficult to articulate.

CONTEXT

A series of reviews funded by DFID indicated that investments in agricultural research often delivered excellent research findings but that the findings produced more limited social and economic impacts than expected. In July 2006, DFID established a five-year flagship program, Research Into Use (RIU). As its name implies, the program's fundamental purpose was to make better use of agricultural research.

OBJECTIVES AND DESCRIPTION

Implemented in South Asia and Africa with a budget of US$50 million, RIU drew inspiration from the innovation systems perspective. It emphasized driving research into use by strengthening networks and partnerships and giving private sector and enterprise perspectives more prominence. It also pursued explicit learning objectives for internal purposes and external policy audiences (for details, see www.research-intouse.org and Hall, Dijkman, and Sulaiman 2010).

RIU had three main elements:

- ***The Asia Challenge Fund (ACF)*** supported 15 consortiums of research and development partners to scale out previously developed technologies. Projects were located in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal. The logic was that the main task in putting research into use was the promotion of technologies and other research products. The technologies dealt with in this way included new crop varieties developed through client-oriented breeding, fish fingerling production techniques, crab and seaweed production, and new management and analytical techniques, including participatory floodplain management and participatory market chain analysis. Over time, many of the consortiums recognized that their main task was not to promote technology per se but to marshal the different players around existing value chains or to develop new ones. Often this work involved bringing additional partners with entrepreneurial expertise into the consortiums. While the Asia Challenge Fund projects

certainly yielded direct developmental outcomes, they were most noteworthy for the extensive institutional changes they stimulated.

- ***The Africa Country Programmes (ACPs)*** were established in Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Zambia with the explicit agenda of brokering new clusters of organizations around selected R&D themes. This agenda was based on the recognition that developmental and market-based opportunities often arise and can use research expertise and findings, but institutional inertia often prevents an appropriate mix of organizations, knowledge, and resources from assembling to innovate in response to such opportunities. The ACPs used innovation platforms and other dialogue mechanisms as starting points to identify opportunities and help organizations link with each other. Some of the initiatives brokered in this way included a smallholder indigenous poultry value chain in Tanzania, an improved fish fingerling supply chain in Malawi, and an integrated livestock fodder and vet service arrangement in Nigeria. With the ACPs' broad, opportunity-driven agenda, many unexpected adaptations took place as organizations in the consortiums found new ways of working with each other, such as new financing mechanisms, new roles for research partners, and new ways of influencing policy. Existing research products (and research expertise) were put into use in these initiatives, and their developmental outcomes were recorded, but the main outcomes from the ACPs were institutional.
- ***The Best Bets***. RIU envisaged that it would identify Best Bet technologies for scaling up, but quickly it shifted to identifying best bet business models and unique consortiums that successfully combined enterprise principles (specifically, a focus on the poor as a market for products and services) with science-Based innovation. The approach proved useful for tapping the ability of entrepreneurs with social credentials to marshal research and other knowledge, resources, and partners to create business innovations that addressed issues as diverse as sleeping sickness control, farm input supplies, and biological control of an aggressive parasitic weed (Striga). Support for these businesses created capacity for continuous innovation around the themes covered. Having focused on supporting existing enterprise-like organizations and consortiums, the Best Bets were better placed than other RIU interventions to achieve direct developmental outcomes. Institutional change was also anticipated, however, as many of the organizations involved were encouraged to assume new roles in the innovation process.

RIU incorporated two further elements: a communications and a research function. The research team, distributed across Asia and Africa, was mandated to draw key policy lessons to inform national and particularly international development investors about better strategies for putting agricultural research into use.

INNOVATIVE ELEMENT: MONITORING AND EVALUATING DEVELOPMENTAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

RIU set targets for development (outcomes measured in terms of benefits to poor people) and institutional and policy change (outcomes measured in terms of changes in key stakeholders' behavior in the innovation process and changes in policies that shape the national and international innovation environment). The emphasis given to these outcomes shifted in the latter part of the project, when a 70 percent impact weighting was assigned to institutional and policy outcomes.

The challenge for RIU was to monitor institutional and policy changes and direct developmental outcomes, even though it was recognized that developmental outcomes would not arise on a significant scale until after the project ended. The task was even more challenging because the interventions evolved a great deal to reflect the emerging understanding of how to put research into use and to take advantage of emerging opportunities to do so.

Part of the challenge lay in the tension over whether RIU was a developmental or institutional change initiative. Management and staff changes brought differing views on this point, which had implications for how M&E was addressed. A consensus eventually emerged that RIU needed to track developmental as well as institutional outcomes. Because RIU was implemented before there was much experience, confidence, or consensus in the use of methods that could address those two outcomes together, the M&E task was largely exploring new ground. The next sections describe the resulting experience and learning.

EXPERIENCE

Following advice from the donor, RIU initially set aside one-third of its budget for the combined task of monitoring impact and learning (MIL). A specialist group was brought in to design and implement an M&E plan, which had two notable elements. The first was a baseline survey for the ACF projects and ACPs to conduct (the Best Bet projects had not

yet started). The second element was that projects were asked to record the events unfolding around their interventions. The data were sent to the UK-based MIL group for analysis.

A new management team and M&E strategy

A midterm and subsequent technical review of RIU were critical of the MIL approach, noting that the baseline exercise was particularly burdensome and provided no clear feedback to the ACF or ACPs. Following these reviews, a new management team was brought into RIU at the beginning of year four of RIU's five-year program. The MIL group disbanded, a new M&E strategy was put into place, and ACF projects and ACPs became responsible for monitoring their progress as they saw fit.

Some projects continued baseline and follow-up studies and tracking. For example, a project promoting varieties developed through client-oriented breeding found those studies useful for targeting, because they identified agroclimatic zones where adoption patterns indicated that the new varieties performed well and were acceptable to farmers. Others found the approach less useful or did not see it as a priority and stopped.

Impact assessment

The new M&E strategy specified that RIU would appoint an independent team to assess impact. Initially RIU struggled to find a suitable evaluator. An evaluator was finally identified and appointed early in 2010, when RIU had about 15 months left to run.

The impact assessment team (as RIU described it) would assemble evidence about outcomes to substantiate lessons that the research team was developing as well as to report to the donor for accountability. Responding to the donor's demands, however, the impact team assumed a more broadly conceived evaluative role, exploring the effectiveness of project cycle management and reporting its findings to the donor.

The impact team also developed a learning approach, drawing on the Theory-Based Impact Evaluation methods developed by Howard White and the 3IE group to assess developmental impacts, explore RIU's theory of change, and revisit its assumptions (for a brief description of the methods, see box 7.19 in TN 5; see also White 2009a, 2009b). Information was collected through household surveys in selected countries and extensive interviews were conducted with RIU staff and stakeholders in RIU focus countries. Box 7.27 summarizes key elements of the evaluation framework.

Problems encountered

The impact team's dual responsibilities for accountability (judging the effectiveness of RIU's implementation) and learning (helping RIU to understand its impact over time)

Box 7.27 Key Elements of the Framework Used to Evaluate Research Into Use

The impact assessment team developed a series of questions to examine the theory of change embedded in the interventions of Research Into Use (RIU). The following are the main categories of questions posed:

- ***Overarching question.*** Has the underlying theory of change—that "new forms of partnership will lead to innovation (which in turn will contribute to poverty reduction and economic growth)"—been shown to be appropriate?
- ***Relevance.*** Given its theory of change, was RIU's design appropriate to explore how to put research into use? Was the program's design appropriate to its ambition to impact on poor people?
- ***Efficiency.*** To what extent was the RIU's information management system (including the M&E system) fit-for-purpose? How did RIU assess the progress of innovations and their contribution (both positive and negative) to building knowledge and addressing market failures?
- ***Effectiveness.*** What partnership arrangements were most effective in understanding and addressing the barriers to innovation, both nationally and locally, and why? What partnership arrangements are effectively ensuring that the innovation process focuses on the issues of gender and social exclusion? Was the research monitoring system effective?
- ***Impact.*** To what extent has RIU impacted poor people?

Source: Adapted from RIU project document.

Box 7.28 Framework for Tracking Institutional Change

Research Into Use (RIU) recognized that it needed to track institutional change, but what sort of institutional change should be tracked? Given that innovation is embedded in a very wide range of relationships in economic systems, the range of institutions that are important in the innovation process is likely to be equally large and varied. Some areas of expected institutional change are very obvious—for example, changes in research practice or changes in patterns of partnership—but because RIU operated in complex development arenas, some institutional changes would be difficult to predict from theory alone.

The broad categories of change listed below were identified through a rapid inventory of institutional changes observed in association with RIU's activities. Institutional changes were defined as things that were being done differently as well as changes in formal policies and rules. The institutional changes in the inventory were sorted into groups to arrive at broad categories of institutional change. Illustrative indicators of each type of change were developed, and this framework was used for deeper investigation and documentation of institutional changes through case studies and writeshops.

- New ways of financing rural innovation.
- New, poverty-relevant ways of working or organizing things.
- Market-related institutional changes.
- Existing types of organizations playing new roles.
- New types of organizations playing new roles.
- Changes in research practice.
- Changes in the policy formulation space/process.
- Effects on donor/government investment behavior.
- New network configurations.
- Formal policy changes.

Source: Adwera et al. 2011.

were managed insensitively. The accountability function was perceived as a policing exercise and tended to impede the learning function, preventing the sharing of information and perspectives. Frequent changes in the impact team, including its leader, exacerbated this problem.

The evaluators and RIU disagreed about the RIU's theory of change. Evaluators articulated it as "partnerships lead to innovation," whereas RIU articulated it as "institutional and policy change will enable innovation." The evaluators found that it was too early to collect the impact data needed to satisfy the Theory-Based Impact Evaluation approach that inspired the design of the evaluation. In other words, an impact evaluation was premature.

A mechanism for systematically capturing change

A more positive result of this experience was that the impact team identified evidence that institutional change was occurring as a result of RIU's efforts. The team also called attention to the fact that RIU lacked a mechanism for systematically capturing this information and using it in dialogue with policy makers and others to leverage wider policy and institutional change.

RIU responded to these findings in a number of ways. It changed its quarterly reporting formats to include institutional change issues. It developed a framework to categorize and track an expanding range of different types of institutional change (box 7.28; Adwera et al. 2011). Institutional histories of the ACPs were commissioned to develop a deeper understanding of how they promoted innovation (box 7.29). Finally, writeshops helped staff implementing interventions to record institutional changes and unexpected outcomes and use the writeups to engage other stakeholders.

LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN DONE DIFFERENTLY?

By the end of RIU's initial five-year lifecycle in June 2011, the impact team had not yet reported its findings (as of this writing, RIU has been extended to June 2012, partly to complete the impact evaluations). Even so, from the work completed so far, a number of lessons related to M&E stand out:

- ***Separate responsibilities for M&E.*** It is critical to maintain the distinction between monitoring and evaluation and to separate the timing and responsibilities for these two functions. RIU started off collecting its own impact

Box 7.29 Rationale and Approach for Innovation Studies Based on Institutional Histories of Africa Country Programmes

The Africa Country Programmes (ACPs) of Research Into Use (RIU) used innovation platforms as one means of enabling innovation. RIU commissioned institutional histories of the ACPs to understand the specific details of how the various innovation platforms were designed and functioned in each setting and to learn how each ACP functioned as a broking or intermediary organization within the wider innovation and development landscape. The decision to use institutional histories reflected the fact that the arrangements and approaches used in each program evolved significantly. All programs took advantage of a range of opportunities; some approaches were less effective than others, but all were instructive. The resulting institutional histories contributed to innovation studies with the following elements:

- A short institutional history of the evolution of RIU, with a strong focus on understanding the changing prominence of core concepts and the way this evolution played out in RIU's strategy, with particular emphasis on the ACPs.
- A detailed institutional history of the ACPs, emphasizing how they organized their work, learned along the way, and evolved in response to the evolution of RIU and the local development, political, and institutional environment.
- A detailed account (in accessible language) of the nature, role, and function of the intermediary/brokering task, including the innovation platforms, to explain what brokering involves.
- Based on those accounts, develop guiding principles for designing a program enabling intermediary agencies/brokers to catalyze innovation and put research into use.

Source: RIU project document.

data (an evaluation function) and, in the process, impeded progress on the action part of its interventions. The expectations of the donor were also important: Donors should be realistic about the type and scale of outcomes likely to be evident in the action-to-impact results chain during the life of an intervention. This statement does not mean that interventions should not track their performance; it means that tracking and managing performance will require data different from the data needed for assessing an intervention's final impact. A suite of well-executed qualitative methods and rapid quantitative surveys would have been much more useful to the ACF projects and ACPs as a way of monitoring and generating feedback on the effectiveness of their actions.

- ***Time the evaluation carefully.*** The impact team initiated its activities prematurely. It could be argued that the effectiveness of program cycle management could be investigated only when the program was still on the ground, but the final impact needs to be explored after the program has come to an end. The nature of RIU, with its emphasis on achieving impact by stimulating institutional and policy change, suggests that this time lag is particularly important. Since this route to impact is complex, chains of causation will need to be explored carefully. In this sense, the baseline studies may yet prove valuable for post-program evaluation, although a more appropriate approach would have been for RIU to commission the design and execution of the baselines independently of the interventions. Then the evaluators could have repeated the surveys after the program ended.
- ***Develop a systematic monitoring plan.*** Monitoring progress toward institutional and developmental targets is challenging and requires technical backstopping so that projects can perform this function as an integral part of their management. Those who need to act on the information generated should have ownership of the monitoring role: Responsibility should lie with the individual projects rather than the central program. Programs should have specific M&E expertise to help design integrated monitoring strategies for others to use rather than to collect data for the M&E expert to analyze. A very large suite of techniques is available for exploring institutional change and understanding relationships between process and outcome (TN 4). The key is to have expertise that is sufficiently familiar with this suite of methods to adapt principles and tools to the specific monitoring needs of each project in the larger program.

- ***Manage tensions between accountability and learning.*** Sensitive management of the interaction between evaluators and programs is needed to deal with the tensions between accountability and learning. This point is particularly important for innovation system interventions, because theories of change are multidimensional and evolving and appear difficult for programs such as RIU to articulate. One approach—viewed as a good practice in the evaluation community—is to employ conversational rather than interrogative information collection techniques with program staff and stakeholders.