Major meetings as entry points for knowledge sharing: a case from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research

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Introduction

Economic globalization, environmental pressures and other forces are rapidly altering the face of tropical agriculture, placing new and changing demands on the 15 centres supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and on their many national partners. Through a broad agenda of multidisciplinary research, these organisations are creating a wealth of knowledge that can contribute to sustainable agricultural development. But they need to become more adept at sharing this knowledge through collaborative learning processes that steadily improve researchers' performance in helping rural people in developing countries solve problems and seize new opportunities.

Efforts to foster knowledge sharing amongst centres and partners have tended to focus on better management of information flows and on the capture of codified knowledge resulting from agricultural research. Though necessary and important, these activities are not sufficient for helping scientists deal with the complex challenges of sustainable agricultural development.

In search of more effective approaches, the centres have embarked on a significant new initiative to improve knowledge sharing (KS). Funded by the World Bank through the CGIAR's Information and Communications Technology-Knowledge Management (ICT-KM) Programme, the KS Project has adopted a practical approach that builds on previous efforts to enhance KS in the centres. An earlier project on this subject succeeded in bringing KS to the attention of a large audience in the CGIAR. It also provided KS training and orientation and led to the elaboration of comprehensive KS strategies in selected centres. They made little progress toward implementing those strategies, however, and project participants concluded that more commitment was required on the part of centre management, supported by human resources policies conducive to KS and further capacity building.

The new initiative described in this paper has pursued a complementary approach that involves incorporating KS principles and techniques into important centre events. The idea is that by creating opportunities for centre management and staff to experiment with KS approaches, the project can demonstrate the value of those approaches as means of facilitating organisational change and research collaboration.

The project has worked toward this end mainly through four pilot initiatives at the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre (CIMMYT), Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), and International Water Management Institute (IWMI), planned by groups of centre staff from 2004 to 2005, with strong support from the central project team. Other activities have included a study of human resource policies in relation to KS and to institutional learning and change, and a training course in facilitation skills.

This paper describes only the CIAT and CIMMYT initiatives, as the other two have not yet been completed and documented. The pilot initiative at CIAT resulted in a new way for the centre to organise and conduct its annual staff meeting, whilst the CIMMYT approach contributed towards the formation of a well-integrated team of scientists who share knowledge and information, and work towards common goals. On the basis of these two experiences, we draw some tentative conclusions about major meetings as entry points for KS in research and development organisations.

A new formula for CIAT's annual staff meeting

Like most other CGIAR centres, CIAT has a long tradition of annual meetings of professional staff. The format has typically focused on plenary sessions, in which researchers deliver formal PowerPoint presentations, followed by questions and discussion. In addition, time is usually allotted for project teams and other groups to review on-going activities and plan future work. Here, as elsewhere, many feel the time spent in annual staff meetings is not used as well as it could be. Too many hours, they say, are consumed by formal presentations, with little in-depth discussion of 'burning issues'. There are few opportunities for the more or less 100 people to get to know each other and establish the collegial relationships that are essential for creative scientific collaboration.

In an effort to address those concerns, the KS Project proposed to CIAT management a major overhaul of its annual staff meeting. The idea was to try an alternative formula that would help staff share knowledge, broaden communication, stimulate dialogue and strengthen personal relationships.

A five-member co-ordination team, with strong skills in KS, information management, communications, and monitoring and evaluation was established to work with CIAT management in planning and carrying out the meeting. The team included a consultant from Canada's Bellanet International Secretariat, which is a key partner in the KS Project. One of the co-ordination team's first tasks was to help management define the meeting's objectives. The team then met with a range of other CIAT staff – in face-to-face meetings at headquarters and via telephone with outposted staff – to check the relevance of the proposed objectives and get reactions to alternative meeting designs. As a result, the week-long meeting (called 'KS Week') was organised around four objectives:

1. Developing a shared understanding of three major new initiatives at CIAT (referred to as 'research-for-development challenges') and contribute to their effective operationalisation.
2. Enhancing the integration of headquarters and regional staff and activities.
3. Promoting effective work planning on the part of project teams and collaborators.
4. Demonstrating how KS techniques can help centre staff.

The gathering of the clan: an Open Space session on new initiatives
The co-ordination team selected well-known KS approaches and complementary measures to achieve those objectives. The Open Space approach was used to involve more than 80 staff in a 2-day session on planning how the centre should move forward to operationalise the research-for-development challenges. Open Space is a highly democratic method of group agenda setting, followed by small-group discussion, reporting and preparation of action plans. The session was held in an expansive open-air setting: the covered patio that forms the northern side of the CIAT campus quadrangle.

To end the first day's proceedings – or, in the lingo of Open Space practitioners, 'to close the circle' – each person shares with the group a word or phrase that captures her or his impression of the day's work. Here is a sampling of results from passing the microphone from person to person: 'provocative ... multifaceted ... confusing ... interesting ... unbounded ... challenging ... frank ... social ... fresh ... energetic ... hard work ... diversity ... listening ... learning ... opportunity ... intriguing'.

During the closing plenary session on day 2, participants commented on the extent to which the 2 days of Open Space meetings did or did not contribute to operationalising the three development challenges. Most of the comments were positive, as illustrated by the following:

- Holding the plenary sessions outdoors was a very positive change.
- Change requires participation: the Open Space sessions provided for a good experience in that regard.
- 'I appreciated the experimental, novel approach'.
- 'It is impressive that priorities were reached so quickly. We now need to put our money where our mouth is'.

In addition to this type of generally positive comment, there was, nevertheless, a recurring message: despite the progress made in formulating action plans, there was still considerable confusion about how CIAT's work should be integrated under the three development challenges. Whilst the meeting format was effective in bringing people together, the discussion did not fully focus on the theme of operationalising the development challenges as two participants noted:

I think we missed the target over the past couple of days.

I had wanted to put meat on the development challenges, but we haven't done that.

Peer Assists for regional and headquarters integration

The Peer Assist method – an approach for tapping the knowledge and experience of colleagues in problem solving – was one process used to address the meeting's second objective, namely that of integration between CIAT's headquarters and regional staff. Managers and staff members were invited to present problems that they personally had experienced, related to relations between headquarters and the regions. Seven individuals were selected to present their problem in a small-group setting. Examples of the problems include:

- What to do when you (a regional staff member) find out that a project has been developed at headquarters and now you're supposed to implement it?
- What to do (if you're the research director) when someone comes to your office to complain that they should have been involved in the development of a project that has now been approved?
- What to do when you (a regional staff member) find that you have three bosses, three work plans and no operating budget?

Like Open Space technology, the Peer Assist encourages interaction. Participants present a problem of their choosing and others may offer advice or analysis on the basis of their personal interest and experience with similar situations. Those who present the problem benefit from the collective wisdom of the group. Others frequently benefit from the interactions, as they realise they possess knowledge and experience of use to others.

A Knowledge Fair on research-support services

As a further aid to headquarters/regional integration, a Knowledge Fair was organised in the form of a 5-hour-long exhibition of support services available within CIAT and other scientific organisations that share the centre's campus. It was a bottom-up exercise: support staff designed the displays and were present to answer visitors' questions and provide services on the spot. The Knowledge Fair focused specifically on support services because of a perception that staff based outside of headquarters, many on other continents, have particular difficulty in accessing these services and in knowing who is doing what (putting faces to names).

As people moved from booth to booth along the outdoor walkways of the CIAT quadrangle, they were greeted by a wandering white-faced mime artist – a local performer well known for his antics on the sidewalks of Cali. The job of this Charlie Chaplin look-alike was to put a smile on the faces of those passing by and to stimulate their curiosity about the fair – all without a spoken word in Spanish, English or any other language.

One senior staff member from Asia reported having an enormously productive tour of the stands. At the Information Systems stand, staff helped him solve a computer problem; at the Human Resources stand, a contract was finalised; and at the Finances stand, a financial difficulty was successfully resolved.

But there is a glitch. A parallel event, running all day, monopolises the time of more than 20 staff members who might otherwise have been available to visit the Research Support Fair. A consultant has flown in to introduce the group to a KS technique

known as appreciative inquiry and to help researchers apply it to one of the development challenges, the enhancement of rural innovation. The idea is to build a shared vision of this development challenge and to investigate ways to meet it, based on best practices and other assets already available within the organisation.

Evaluating KS Week
Whether centre staff find KS approaches helpful (thus fulfilling the meeting's fourth objective) and begin incorporating them into other activities depends obviously on the effectiveness of these approaches. The co-ordination team employed two techniques for gauging the utility of KS Week and identifying ways to improve it.

First, a 'barometer team' was formed to monitor the week's activities and recommend ways to make future meetings more effective. For this purpose, the team conducted After Action Reviews. The team consisted of five headquarters staff, four outposted staff, the meeting facilitator and one other communications consultant. Meeting three times during KS Week, the team made 48 recommendations related to the event's strengths and weaknesses, directly observed by team members or reported to them by other participants. In a particularly significant observation on the Open Space event, the barometer team recognised that many CIAT staff did not grasp the development challenges in sufficient detail to be able to design action plans. 'We should have done a better job of determining whether people understood the topic well enough to discuss it', commented one team member.

The second approach for judging the usefulness of CIAT's KS Week was a formal evaluation. Most KS Week participants surveyed were positive about it and felt the meeting had improved communication and relationships, and demonstrated the value of KS techniques. Whilst it is difficult to assess the usefulness of specific KS tools, apart from the usefulness of the sessions in which they were used, most participants indicated they had found the Peer Assist, Knowledge Fair and Open Space approaches useful. They also expressed interest in using these approaches in the future and felt they should be incorporated into CIAT projects. Moreover, they suggested that special attention should be paid to involving nationally recruited staff members more fully in KS activities.

When asked to compare KS Week with previous annual meetings, participants responded that the communication and interaction were more effective than in other years. They also appreciated not being confined to closed, dark rooms for lengthy PowerPoint presentations. Nonetheless, one aspect of previous meetings that participants preferred over KS Week was the exchange of scientific information on work in progress, results and impacts. They suggested that some mechanism be found to facilitate the exchange of such information, but without returning to the previous format of non-stop presentations with limited discussion.

Sharing knowledge on wheat improvement at CIMMYT

CIMMYT has a long tradition of world-class wheat science. The most recent embodiment of this legacy is the Wheat Improvement Group (WIG), a research team

of some 30 members spread across seven countries. In the spring of 2005, the centre's wheat research station at Ciudad Obregón in northwestern Mexico provided the

setting for a 3-day workshop, the first annual meeting of this newly reconstituted wheat group.

A number of problems have plagued past collaboration amongst wheat scientists. First, sharing knowledge amongst staff, who are scattered across the globe, has posed a number of logistical challenges. Second, budgets and other administrative matters have tended to dominate meeting agendas, pushing key scientific issues to the back burner. Finally, conventional meeting formats have not been conducive to creative participation and effective KS.

CIMMYT has a new strategic plan and recently reorganised itself into six multidisciplinary programmes to implement the plan. Knowledge management (KM) is highlighted in the centre's mission statement and is part of the mandate of one of the programmes. Complementing the programmes are several thematic groups, including WIG, whose job it is to ensure scientific rigour in CIMMYT's research and foster innovation.

The WIG meeting was planned by two meeting facilitators (the Bellanet consultant and the KS Project co-ordinator mentioned earlier) with the WIG co-ordinator and other CIMMYT staff, based on the following objectives:

1. Clarify how WIG can contribute to the centre's priority areas of work;
2. Contribute to the formation of a well-integrated team of scientists who share knowledge and information and who work towards common goals; and
3. Use the collective wisdom of the group to develop plans to solve some of the key science issues confronting wheat improvement.

A final objective was specifically related to improved KS:

4. To record lessons and good practices that can be shared within CIMMYT and the CGIAR.

Open Space: setting the agenda
On Wednesday morning, with 39 people sitting in a large circle in the *bodega* (a warehouse that serves as a site for sorting and packing wheat seed samples), the WIG co-ordinator formally opened the group's first annual meeting. He stressed that the meeting would be an opportunity to discuss wheat science, specifically how to conduct high-quality research for CIMMYT's programmes.

One of facilitators then explained the Open Space approach. During the facilitator's introduction, a scientist strongly objected to the process proposed and to the presence of the facilitators from the KS Project team:

> *Here we go again with a couple of management consultants who are going to waste our time and distract us from our own agenda.*

It was clear that he was not alone in this opinion. There seemed to be particular concern about the large amount of time allocated to the exercise, especially in the

light of the brevity of the overall meeting. He preferred to have a more formal structure imposed on the meeting at the outset.

The objection stopped the flow of the meeting dead in its tracks. There was an uncomfortable edge to the opening session. The facilitators offered further explanation of the process and the WIG co-ordinator asked the group for a measure of trust. The session then continued as planned. Participants with topics to propose wrote them down on cards. All the cards were posted on a wall – the 'marketplace' – with times and locations of discussion groups.

The topics identified by participants covered a broad scientific territory from wheat breeding strategies to training for national research systems and biotechnology applications. The small-group discussions were generally animated, focused and at times provocative. Over the course of the day, participants continued to add new topics to the marketplace. Space had been created to discuss all issues of importance and participants were now willing to take advantage of it.

By the end of the day, participants were engaged and requesting additional time the following day to continue their discussions. When participants were asked to share their impressions of the day in a phrase or sentence, their responses included the following: 'Where's the low morale?... I take my hat off to you all.... How can we put words into action?... Cross-fertilisation of ideas.... I can now put faces to names... Glad not to have regular presentations.... Hope we can get into the science tomorrow.'

Ranking topics and action planning
Most of the second day, Thursday, was devoted to discussion of selected topics and to drafting of action plans for those priority topics. This process began with a 20-minute period of reading, followed by quiet discussion of the brief reports that came out of the previous day's discussions.

Upon completion of a voting process, the WIG co-ordinator announced the five priority topics for further discussion and action planning. One of the facilitators then briefly ran through some of the necessities of a good action plan: concrete elements such as goals, who will execute the plan, in what time frame and with what resources. With those guidelines made clear, the participants broke into sub-groups. Once again, the discussions were lively, detailed and fruitful, resulting in five plans.

Peer Assists: colleagues helping colleagues
On the last day, 30 people including the KS Project team congregated in the bodega for the Peer Assist sessions. Here are two examples of the problems the peer 'assistees' elected to share with their peers: (1) how to cope with the logistical and security problems of running a CIMMYT office in a challenging location: Afghanistan; and (2) how to balance the need for product development with scientists' need to publish. After a first round of discussions, lasting about half an hour, peer assistees and their facilitators moved on to the next group, bringing their flip charts with them. Thus, each assistee benefited from the wisdom of another group, not just the initial subgroup of interested parties.

Assistees, facilitators and participants at large expressed a variety of observations on the sessions. A sampling:

- 'I liked the sympathy and appreciated the ideas.'
- A diversity of contributors favours a successful outcome.
- Clear specification of the problem is essential; doing this is half the work of identifying potentially useful solutions.
- 'I might use it [the Peer Assist method] again in technical meetings.'

After Action Review of Dgroups
To evaluate the WIG Dgroup, an e-mail-based discussion space set up several months earlier by Bellanet, an hour-long After Action Review (AAR) was conducted. The purpose of conducting the After Action Review was twofold. First, to find out how the Dgroup could be more effective in strengthening the WIG and, second, to introduce this tool as a learning process.

The After Action Review consisted of a plenary discussion focused on several simple questions: What is the purpose of the Dgroup? What has actually happened so far regarding its use? What has worked well and what has not? What should be done differently?

It was reported that Dgroup traffic was rather slow at first but that the discussion list is now well used. One director said he had been exploiting this channel to stimulate discussion of scientific issues. Other uses by Dgroup members include sharing scientific reports and articles, and circulating tables of contents of journals. Many aspects of e-forum operation were discussed, with participants particularly interested in Dgroup etiquette and procedures that promote efficiency. A clear message emerging from the discussion was that the Dgroup is extremely useful but that users need guidance and practical advice on how to make the most of this information service.

Closing the circle and participant evaluations
At the close of WIG meeting, participants were asked to reflect on the 2.5 days of sessions and the KS techniques employed. The task took two forms: the final closing of the circle and filling out a four-page questionnaire.

In the final few minutes of plenary, one participant noted that the ultimate litmus test of the meeting will be concrete follow-up of the action plans. Others mentioned that whilst discussion had been excellent, it might have been better to give the meeting a narrower focus.

The written evaluations, by 32 of the 36 CIMMYT staff in attendance, show that their overall reaction to the design and implementation of the WIG meeting was positive. On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 signifies poor and 5 excellent, participants deemed the meeting 'good', with an average rating of 3.9. On the whole, most participants felt the meetings' objectives were accomplished, the average score for all three wheat-related objectives being 3.7 on the 5-point scale. Achievement of the team-building objective got the highest score: 4.0. This is fully consistent with participants' comments which

point to the importance of face-to-face meetings, improved communication and enhanced team spirit.

On the down side, the evaluation results indicated that many participants felt there was too little time available to deal adequately with the entire meeting agenda, and they would have appreciated having more clear recommendations formulated.

In the evaluation, participants were also asked about the usefulness of the various KS techniques used to CIMMYT and to themselves personally. The After Action Review method, applied to evaluate the WIG Dgroup, proved to be the most popular.

Complementary activities

Through the two pilot initiatives described here and the others in process, the KS Project is exploring the potential of major meetings as entry points for promoting KS in the CGIAR. But this work must be accompanied by other initiatives as well, if we are to achieve the behavioural and cultural changes needed for mainstreaming KS. Three topics receiving particular attention are: training in facilitation skills; fostering KS through human resources policies and practices; and a 'toolkit' for KS practitioners in the CGIAR

Training in facilitation skills
Facilitation skills are essential for CGIAR staff, not only for organising better meetings, but also for working more effectively with partners in teams involving people from different organisations, backgrounds, disciplines, nationalities and cultures. For that reason, the KS Project joined forces with the CGIAR Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative to offer training on the facilitation of group decision-making. The objective of the course was to build participants' facilitation skills for conducting meetings, working with teams, managing conflict and building consensus.

The training proved extremely effective. Three months after the course, over half of participants had used their new skills to facilitate work-related meetings and had shared the skills with colleagues. One participant commented as follows:

> *Using the techniques I learnt at the course, I facilitated a very important 2-day meeting of CIFOR's senior management team on strategic staffing. I introduced the 'gradient of agreement', which was used throughout the meeting before making decisions. It was a highly productive and satisfactory meeting.*

Given the highly positive results of the first course, a second course on facilitation skills will be held in November 2005.

Fostering KS through human resource policies and practices
Management systems and practices may or may not be conducive to introducing or mainstreaming KS. To gain a better knowledge of this issue and to identify key areas

for future intervention, the KS Project and the ILAC Initiative carried out a joint study on the role of human resources policies and practices in fostering KS and organisational learning. The study examined six CGIAR centres as well as six other organisations that are regarded as leaders in this task.[1]

All of the organisations studied, including the CGIAR centres, are promoting KS and organisational learning to some extent, generally in the context of broader organisational change efforts. Whilst some of the organisations studied have pursued comprehensive, integrated approaches, most have resorted to small-scale efforts, seeking incremental changes. It is sometimes assumed that CGIAR centres are far behind other research and development organisations in KS and organisational learning. Our findings indicate, though, that whilst most of the centres covered in the study lack comprehensive strategies, some are actively pursuing promising initiatives, from which others can learn.

Three key factors were identified that influence the success of efforts to foster change through KS sharing and organisational learning: (1) public support for such initiatives from top leaders; (2) an explicit recognition of the way in which the organisation's business strategies are reinforced by KS and organisational learning; and (3) effective policies and practices for internal communication that support KS and organisational learning.

KS Toolkit
The 'toolkit' for KS practitioners in the CGIAR, to be available on the Web, will present a selection of KS methods and approaches. Short descriptions of each tool will be cited from the most relevant sources and step-by-step guides will be provided for their use. The toolkit will also provide links and references to more information, as well as stories from experiences in the use of these tools. Finally, it will provide a list of possible contacts from peers who have used the tools and are willing to share their experiences. Users of the toolkit will be encouraged to enrich the content by contributing their own references, stories and contacts.

Lessons learned and future directions

The four pilot initiatives developed under the KS Project are based on the hypothesis that high-profile events, involving sizable numbers of staff and featuring the use of alternative or unconventional KS approaches, can be an effective entry point for promoting adoption of those approaches. The experience at CIAT and CIMMYT seems to bear out this hypothesis. Through these events, large numbers of staff gained direct experience with KS approaches, and when asked to evaluate that experience, the results were largely positive. Both meetings made significant progress towards their individual objectives, and many staff expressed enthusiasm about the new style of conducting meetings. Even so, it is also clear from the experiences presented in this paper that our organisation and planning of such events can be improved. Towards this end, we have begun a process of identifying lessons learned from the pilot initiatives which will culminate in a 5-day workshop (to be held in September 2005) encompassing all four pilots.

Some of the lessons we have drawn from the experience so far may seem rather obvious. For example, both the CIAT and CIMMYT pilots underscore the importance of involving as many staff as possible in planning the event. We thought we knew that, but evidently we did not put it into practice very well.

At CIAT, whilst the co-ordination team held extensive discussions with management and staff at headquarters, it consulted only the regional co-ordinators to gauge the views of the centre's numerous outposted staff. In reflecting on the Open Space session, we realized that many of the outposted staff did not have enough information about the research-for-development challenges to participate effectively in planning their operationalisation, a key objective of the meeting. Broader consultation with outposted staff may have brought this obstacle to light at an earlier stage and prompted us to organise the Open Space session differently.

In the course of such consultations, it is important to remain alert to individuals who show special interest and are prepared to invest time in experimenting with new ways of working with groups. These people are potential KS 'champions', and their support is vital for organising and conducting individual events and for achieving acceptance of KS approaches. Time and resources should be devoted to building their confidence and capacity.

Another lesson that emerged from both the CIAT and CIMMYT events is to be prepared for the unexpected. Knowledge sharing processes generate different reactions from those who experience them from enthusiasm and motivation to confusion and frustration and, in some cases, to anger. Attempts to ensure that KS will generate only positive reactions can be ineffective and, in the case of Open Space, a waste of time. Preparations for the first meeting of the WIG at CIMMYT provide the best example. Prior to the meeting of WIG members, a significant effort was made to contact members of the group to walk them through the agenda; to explain the processes to be used and why they were selected; and to solicit, and take into account, any feedback or issues among the members. Based on conversations with more than five of the WIG members, the KS Project team felt quite comfortable that there were no major issues with the planned processes. However, it became quite clear within the first 10 minutes of the meeting that there were indeed issues with the process, even from those who had individually spoken with someone from the KS Project team. After a shaky start, the group agreed to move forward as planned, and by the end of the day, the energy and motivation in the room were contagious. Whilst we had tried to prepare ourselves for the expected, being prepared for the unexpected worked in our favour, as we were able to deal with issues as they emerged.

Of course, we will never achieve flawless execution of KS events. And even if we could, we must bear in mind that these events are only part of an integrated KS strategy. They may arouse interest in KS amongst large numbers of staff. But to apply KS approaches, staff need new skills, reliable sources of continuing support, and clear incentives to pursue their interest in KS. Hence the importance of the above-mentioned facilitation training and the work on human resources policies and practices.

It remains to be seen how wider application of KS approaches can affect a centre's culture and performance or can improve the performance of the CGIAR as a whole; the ultimate goal of the KS Project. In the project, we assume that more dynamic communication and sharing of knowledge will lead to better decisions and more effective teamwork, resulting in greater efficiency and effectiveness. But it is really too early to rigorously test this assumption by measuring the results of the KS Project at the level of CGIAR centres or the CGIAR as a whole.

Whether we are able to pursue this question depends on how the ICT-KM Programme, in collaboration with centres and others, follows up on the pilot initiatives and complementary activities described here within the CGIAR. Regardless of what transpires on that front, it is important for each of the centres involved in the pilots to devise their own action plans for promoting KS and for further developing in-house capacity to implement those plans. CIAT, for example, will continue to foster KS amongst centre staff by offering permanent training in KS approaches through its Communications Unit.

For future KS initiatives in the CGIAR, we believe an important next step is to begin applying KS approaches in our increasingly complex collaboration with a growing array of international, national and local partners. If we do ultimately succeed in demonstrating that KS can enhance the centres' contribution to development, then the impact of KS is most likely to come from its beneficial effects on collaborative arrangements. Recent experience at IWMI and CIAT in sharing KS with project partners suggests that KS for more effective partnerships is a highly promising avenue. We suspect that, as centre staff realise that KS is a powerful tool for facilitating research and development collaboration, they will be more committed to help promote KS within their own centres and in the CGIAR generally.

Abstract

Annual meetings are a long-standing tradition in the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and an essential tool by which the international centres supported by the CGIAR plan and review their work. As centres have decentralised their operations, the costs of these events have grown, so both managers and staff have begun seeking ways to extract greater returns from the increased investment in international travel and staff time. One alternative is to exploit the opportunities that annual meetings and workshops offer for testing and demonstrating the value of knowledge sharing (KS) approaches. The idea is to move away from conventional presentations and plenary discussions to a dynamic process of face-to-face communication that is more effective at promoting KS.

Managers and staff of four CGIAR centres explored this alternative through pilot initiatives in which they used a variety of KS approaches, including Open Space, Peer Assists, After Action Reviews, Knowledge Fairs and collaborative tools, specifically Dgroups and an online meeting planner. Special attention was given to the crucial role of group facilitation and the need for modernizing management systems and practices. This paper, based on the authors' experience and participants' evaluations of the pilot initiatives, outlines the approaches developed by two of the four centres, describes the challenges they faced, and draws some conclusions about future directions.

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Endnotes

[1] For further information on the study, see Krista Baldini (2005) The role of human resources policies and practices in fostering knowledge sharing and organizational learning. *ILAC Brief* 11, IPGRI: Rome