Promoting Agricultural Innovation in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia: an impact evaluation programme

Grantee Inception Workshop Report

The workshop commenced with a welcome address from Dr David Ameyaw, the director of the AGRA Strategy, Monitoring and Evaluation Department. He emphasised the need to innovate to increase agricultural productivity in Africa and the role impact evaluations can play in facilitating the process. This was followed by an address on the workshop objectives by Dr Jyotsna Puri, deputy executive director and the head of evaluation at 3ie. She also provided an overview of the Agricultural Innovations Thematic Window and the knowledge gaps in the sector that it seeks to address. She laid out the main attributes of good high-quality evaluations and highlighted the role of implementing agencies in design and roll out of evaluations that are policy relevant. She emphasised the importance of constant engagement between 3ie, research teams and policymakers during the lifetime of the study to ensure impact evaluation studies are of high quality and the findings are useful.

After a brief round of introductions, attendees were split into four different groups where in parallel sessions they discussed their research questions and methodologies (in the study design sessions) and their strategies for policy engagement (in the policy influence sessions). 3ie, AGRA and IFAD experts on evaluation and policy as well as externally invited experts provided constructive feedback on both themes.

The discussions around evaluation designs were effective in pointing out design shortcomings, for example, the theory of change, sample size determination, evaluation timeline and the relevance of the research question. Research teams defended their designs well, but in some cases had to admit that they needed more time on the drawing board to fine tune the evaluation.

The sessions on policy engagement proved to be very fruitful. For many research teams, looking at policy relevance and stakeholder engagement systematically was a new challenge. 3ie’s mission is to fund evaluations that will be used in policy and practice. This uptake relies on organised, timely and effective engagement with key stakeholders from design through dissemination of findings. Discussions drove home the importance of developing research questions based on inputs from policymakers and practitioners in order to address their evidence needs. Using the 3ie policy engagement approach, teams recognised the importance of attention to context,

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1Beryl Leach, 3ie deputy director and head of policy, advocacy and communication, Jyotsna Puri, Markus Olapade, 3ie senior evaluation specialist and Stuti Tripathi, 3ie senior policy officer, Abigail Abandoh-Sam (AGRA-EAP), Alessandra Garbero (IFAD), Backson Sibanda (AGRA-EAP), David Ameyaw (AGRA), Josephine Njau (AGRA), Peter Wandwasi (AGRA-EAP), Marzia Perilli (IFAD), Mhosva Nyasha (AGRA), Samuel Amanquah (AGRA), Susan Ndungu (AGRA), Seth Abu-Bonsrah (AGRA), Sulley Gariba (AGRA-EAP), Zenda Ofir (AGRA-EAP)
thorough stakeholder analysis and risk analysis, and early and ongoing dialogue and relationship-building with key actors. The teams worked with 3ie policy advisors to develop their policy engagement plans further during the workshop breakout sessions.

Lessons Learnt

This workshop was first of its kind where 3ie brought together researchers and implementers to discuss study design in order to refocus research on questions that are policy relevant and have potential for policy impact. The experience reinforced the value of holding such collaborative events, as well as was provided important learnings for design of future workshops. Participant feedback highlighted the following areas of improvement:

1. Provide scope for more inter-team interaction and opportunity to learn about wider pool of studies. The parallel session format of separating teams into tracks meant that teams only heard about the work of the other teams in their assigned track. The result was that some teams were not able to hear about similar and relevant work from teams in the other track.
2. Integrate sessions on design and policy rather than have teams present their projects once for design discussions and again for policy discussions.
3. Encourage involvement of implementing agency by have their representatives present on the context and the intervention to be evaluated.
4. Allow time to the implementing agency and the research teams to collaborate prior and during the workshop to address concerns about the study design and relevance. A related issue was to ensure that those attending the workshop are the ones making programmatic and evaluation design related decisions.

Participants felt that the workshop was helpful in as much as it introduced them to useful ideas around designs of evaluations and standards of rigorous research, and new approaches to assessing policy relevance and planning policy engagement for improved uptake of findings into policy and practice. The presence of experts and peers at the workshop enabled teams to get feedback on various aspect of the study and also provided an opportunity to network.

Given the energy and enthusiasm that the workshop generated and the positive feedback received from the participants on the utility of such a forum, 3ie will be making grantee-implementing agency inception workshops a standard feature for finalising thematic window grant-making.