

EXTERNAL REVIEW AND IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF THE AFRICAN HIGHLANDS INITIATIVE (AHI)

Brief of the Program Evaluation Report

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It is widely acknowledged that INRM is a means of achieving the CGIAR's multiple goals of food security, poverty alleviation, and protection of the natural environment. The CGIAR has defined INRM as "a way of doing development-oriented research to simultaneously tackle poverty, ensure food security and environmental protection." These elements of human well-being are best addressed by enhancing the well-being of the ecosystem in which people live and work. In INRM approaches, problems are identified in a participatory manner, involving farmers and policy makers from the start. Inter-disciplinary research on alternative solutions then follows, using the actions identified in the first step. Since agro-ecosystems are driven by the interactions of ecological, economic, and social variables, INRM research has to work back and forth across all three dimensions.

The prevailing serious degradation of the natural resource base in the intensively cultivated and overpopulated highlands of Eastern and Central Africa has resulted from poor land management systems associated with traditional farming practices, on the one hand, and the concerted effort to improve agricultural productivity through intensification and diversification, on the other. This has been exacerbated by the fact that the majority of poor small-scale farmers have not adopted many of the improved agricultural technologies and practices aimed at mitigating some of these problems. Cognizance of this concern led to the formulation of AHI both as an eco-regional program of the CGIAR and a regional program of the Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa (ASARECA). AHI was initiated in 1995 as a consortium of national and international agricultural research and development organizations.

AHI's core role as an innovator is to develop novel methods and approaches for participatory INRM through testing in pilot sites, cross-site synthesis, and regional dissemination and institutionalization. AHI's targeted beneficiaries and partners in this work include national and international research organizations and networks, development organizations, local governments, civil society organizations, service providers, policy makers, community-based organizations, and male and female farmers.

AHI has implemented its activities at benchmark sites in Eastern and Central African countries (e.g., Ethiopia, Tanzania, and Uganda). A multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional team of researchers and development workers, located at each benchmark site, works with farmers in a participatory mode. A regional research team based at AHI's regional headquarters in Kampala, Uganda, supports the site teams. Technical and methodological support is also provided by regional research fellows (RRFs) based in the collaborating countries or at AHI headquarters. A regional coordinator provides technical and administrative support. AHI uses capacity building as an instrument to enhance the competence of scientists and associated partners.

AHI uses an approach in developing and managing its research/development programs that allows a large number of stakeholders to have an active role in identifying and prioritizing research themes. The use of multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional research teams at benchmark sites in each participating country enhances testing relevant social and technological systems/approaches to solve problems related to agricultural productivity and environment management.

Documentation and data on outcomes and impacts at the sites are important in planning strategically the future research and investment in Eastern Africa region. Frequent evaluation and feedback help the program to improve planning, implementation, and monitoring activities, which contributes to effectiveness in achieving set goals and objectives. Against this background, AHI and its host institutions, with financial support from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), requested an external review and impact assessment (ERIA) to review program progress and assess AHI's performance in the region. Although AHI's evolution has occurred in several phases and has required modifying its contextual framework, this review concentrates on phase III and IV, though it draws upon the external evaluations of previous phases.

The objectives of the ERIA are as follows:

1. Assess the extent to which the program is meeting its objectives and aims, as set out in its directives, and identify any evolution in program objectives;
2. Document and assess program results (i.e., outputs, outcomes, and impacts at the household, landscape, district, and institutional levels);
3. Offer reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of the program's thematic approach and strategies in relation to the current thinking and practice;
4. Assess the composition and functioning of the program team as it relates to its ability to meet program objectives;
5. Make recommendations on how AHI could adapt in light of the current situation and anticipate changes within the field of INRM research.

To carry out the assignment within the brief time allotted and provide feedback to AHI and its stakeholders, donor, and host institutions, the ERIA team:

1. Performed a desktop review of all documentation (from AHI's website, briefs, working papers, journal publications, and other relevant reports made available by AHI);
2. Carried out household surveys in four sites (Lushoto in Tanzania, Kapchorwa in Uganda, and Areka and Ginchi in Ethiopia), conducted more than 400 household interviews, performed data analyses focusing on impacts on households, communities, and local institutions, and generated both quantitative and qualitative information; households for the survey were drawn from three categories: "participating" households in the watershed, "other residents" in the watershed who are expected to benefit from spillovers and "control" group from outside the project area for counterfactual comparisons
3. Conducted focus group discussions on landscape issues with farmer groups;
4. Interviewed stakeholders at the institutional level to record AHI outputs and assess AHI outcomes and, in some instances, impacts on partner institutions;
5. Reviewed four field reports by consultants and a synthesis of the results of the household surveys and focus group discussions.

Review Findings

Phases I and II paved the way for achieving impacts on farmers' livelihoods and the environment through improved crop varieties and other innovations. In phases III and IV, the goals and objectives became more complex and challenging. AHI started making progress on promoting institutionalization of NRM approaches, despite its relatively lower capacity to influence the pace of institutional change in most institutions. Progress on declared objectives is generally good for current phase IV. AHI has undergone an adaptive learning process while responding to change, usually taking into account the views of different stakeholders at various levels. Yet the distinct phases show a shift in focus, in part due in response to changes in the working context and to a lesser extent, to changes in leadership.

In phase IV institutionalization of the INRM approach was developed further. Although AHI's mode of working "locally" while synthesizing and influencing "regionally" brought about good progress in developing the integrated watershed approach. More time is needed to fully institutionalize the INRM approach at all levels, given the need for "mind-set" change and to integrate a more diverse group of stakeholders to scientists, managers, policy-makers, and institutions. Research has shifted to promote self-led institutional change, farmer institutional development, and landscape governance.

Continuous, long-term funding by the donors during the 14 years since AHI's inception, also as a result of AHI's track of successful work, also allowed establishing and sustaining a system for monitoring achievements on development pathways and impacts in the program.

Household survey results showed that positive impacts were observed in all sites in terms of improved crop productivity and increased income (mostly from agriculture). In all sites, greater impacts were observed in the participant group, followed by the other residents or “spillover” group, and finally, the control group. Different levels of spillover effects were observed in the different sites. Similar patterns were observed in terms of outcomes, such as collectively solving NRM issues, compliance with bylaws, and widespread testing and adapting of new technologies.

The main factors that facilitated the process include frequent training and visits, the particular participatory methods, involvement of village leaders; attention to gender aspects, provision of testing/demonstration materials (such as seed) and responding to community needs, involvement of farmers in meetings and workshops, farmer exchange visits, and radio and TV messages. Even more adoption and impact could have been achieved (and in the future can be achieved) if AHI had facilitated more dissemination, promotional strategies and /mechanisms of knowledge management such as field days, radio and TV programs, etc.

AHI has strong and effective implementation modalities through participatory action research, recognized by both farmers and stakeholders. This is related to AHI’s capacity to address, from the bottom-up, the main entry points raised by farmers. AHI methods developed and adaptations of approaches to the local context have enabled stakeholders to understand the complex nature of INRM and improve the learning process, leading to greater adoption of the approach. The strengths of the program are related to its strong commitment to NRM; informal capacity building of partner institutions and scientists; advocacy for change in research approaches; influencing other actors (e.g. the Sub Saharan Africa Challenge Program (SSA CP); consolidation of system components and their relationships; and the ability to influence communities using social science and participatory tools.

Clear impacts were observed by the ERIA at the participant household level and outcomes at the level of local institutions in the sites (especially in terms of adopting the approach and changing attitudes towards research, principally at the grass root level and, in some cases, institutions; and in terms of understanding and adopting natural resource management) as well as local spillovers to non-participants. AHI has been successful in building capacity of stakeholders in different areas (e.g. farmers more readily recognize and solve NRM issues, communities solve conflicts in participatory ways, empowered farmer institutions such as the farmers research groups (FRGs); this has often been driven by the needs expressed by local stakeholders, end users, farmers, and institutions. There is awareness and appreciation of watershed management, in particular, and INRM, in general, among many high level officials, leaders of institutions, and policy makers.

As a result of good interaction between AHI’s biophysical and socio-economic components, and a community driven approach, AHI was able to deliver actual results through INRM. This is a rare achievement within the CGIAR. The process was also facilitated by long-term investments by AHI donors and commitment of the host institution, both necessary for developing and testing long-term complex innovations.

The institutionalization of the INRM approach is taking place, though at different speeds and with different degrees of effectiveness across sites and countries, depending on

specific local challenges. This has been supported by successful facilitation of local level networks at the watershed level and the engagement of different types of stakeholders through training and dissemination methods.

The process of disseminating AHI outputs and methods is fairly effective at the international level, especially through its rich web site (www.africanhighlands.org). Training in methods at the local and regional levels was often mentioned as an example of successful AHI activity. AHI's other achievements have been acting as a 'think tank' for developing tools and methods, and for institutionalizing INRM at the regional level. AHI contributed to the conceptual design and development of the SSA Challenge Program now in progress in three pilot learning sites in west, eastern and central and southern Africa. Additionally, AHI has provided technical backstopping in the selection of these sites, in the development of tools for baseline data, participatory monitoring framework and strategies for establishment of innovation platforms. AHI has also shared its experience, knowledge, and products with other CGIAR centers.

Looking at other areas of improvement, the participatory way of working with farmers through action research, while allowing AHI to address in several instances from the bottom-up, the main entry points raised by farmers, risks overstressing AHI's activities and its capacity for addressing NRM issues. In general, program activities and work themes seem not to have very well defined boundaries and at times appear to lack focus. Effective prioritization mechanisms, often already in place to some extent, are needed.

The dissemination and publicity of AHI's work and approach are satisfactory at the international level but appear to be limited at the national and local levels, hence limiting AHI's national visibility.

Recommendations

The ERIA arrived at recommendations for consideration by AHI and its stakeholders:

Building on its most specialized and recognized strengths, i.e., the capacity to foster and catalyze partnerships, to conduct participatory research effectively in order to identify and promote INRM technologies that meet the needs of local users, and to facilitate actions by key local players.

Investing more in local scientists and organizations as a way to ensure the sustainability of the process it promotes, and to be able to build successful strategies and modalities for future “disengagement” and out-scaling strategies with its partners.

Strengthening and seeking institutional partnerships to influence policy adjustments and linkages to enhance INRM in collaboration with the Ministries of Agriculture and Environment, and local governments. The success of AHI and the up / out scaling of its methods and approaches depend on collaboration with different partners. When its partners face difficulties or restructuring, AHI's work is affected. AHI should consider and be prepared to face partners' changes, and that other players also get on board.

Reviewing the criteria to be used when deciding which new areas of work to tackle (or not), and the process to guide its choices through a systematic and participatory process at different stakeholder levels.

Assisting and backstopping NARS to conduct more adaptive and validation type research to supplement the research on methods that AHI is already heavily engaged in. Some stakeholders indicated that the supply of NRM technologies is still limited and hence needs continued attention.

Developing a (short) list of “flagship products” as public goods to focus, communicate its areas of work and what it aims to deliver. Having a “road map” and an impact path way that The ERIA provides AHI with material and evidence to further discuss and develop in participatory ways its key flagship products.

Improving and expanding its dissemination and publicity efforts at the national and local levels using modern dissemination technologies; and building on its own good experiences (e.g. the Telecenters).

Improving the internal information flows from its leaders to its grassroots members, and vice versa. The overall framework of the approaches and interventions at different scales should be publicized more, and clarified to new and external viewers and stakeholders.

Attempting to broaden its donor base, AHI should devote efforts to broadening local-level (national, district) sources of funding to ensure the sustainability of the program. Improved timeliness of sourcing of funds from donors and release of funds to its field activities is very critical to achieve its goals.

AHI has had tangible impact on the livelihoods of participants and, in some cases, of other farmers in the sites, as well as several positive outcomes on farmers and partner institutions. Yet impacts are mainly local, and the outcomes for partners, in particular at national levels, now need to be strengthened and expanded. It would be timely for AHI to facilitate the up / out-scaling of its methods and approaches by building on partnerships in subsequent phases.

As perceived by the ERIA as well as by various stakeholders, AHI should keep researching on methods, but the balance may need to change; in the next phase it may need to focus more on INRM options and out/up-scaling its approaches to increase impact. We also recommend exploring new research areas, e.g. on how to build effective and sustainable “exit” and out scaling strategies in the current sites and start expanding to new sites and opportunity areas.

Given its eco-regional mandate, experience, unique achievements, and key strengths, AHI might develop into a center of excellence of INRM. We recommend building a “hub style” regional coordination and management structure, cost effective and technical, to play such an important role.

Finally, the ERIA suggests to AHI a possible trajectory to be followed during the next 3-10 years, for consideration and reflection. As AHI’s main comparative advantage lies in its implementation of “INRM that works”, the evolution of the program is towards a center of excellence on INRM, that other centers—in the CGIAR and outside it—international organizations, NGOs, and national institutes can refer to in order to successfully initiate and implement INRM approaches.