

# Cross-sectoral collaboration for health and sustainability: a new agenda for generating and assessing research impact in the face of complexity

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*Summary report from the IDRC-ILRI Workshop at the 2013 Prince Mahidol Award Conference*

***International Development Research Centre  
in collaboration with the  
International Livestock Research Institute***

**ILRI**  
INTERNATIONAL  
LIVESTOCK RESEARCH  
INSTITUTE

**IDRC**  **CRDI**  
International Development  
Research Centre      Centre de recherches pour le  
développement international

**Canada** 

## Background

Global health practitioners are increasingly tasked with addressing problems (such as infectious diseases, chronic diseases, or malnutrition) that are borne of complex and globalized interactions between people, ecosystems, and socio-economic processes. The underlying drivers of (and solutions to) contemporary global health issues are not only multi-factorial - they cross cultural, sectoral and disciplinary boundaries.

One health<sup>1</sup>, ecohealth<sup>2</sup>, global health and similar approaches are part of a family of approaches to research and implementation that draw upon a diversity of perspectives to better address these complex and intractable problems. Through an integrated lens, researchers and practitioners are able to untangle the intricate web of issues which are embedded within these global health challenges, generate new knowledge and understanding, and identify potential points for action.

Despite widespread international support for integrated and cross-sectoral approaches to global health, there are few examples of integrated initiatives outside of the health and veterinary sectors, and such approaches remain mostly absent from the realm of decision-making and global health policy.

Two major barriers prevent the global institutionalization of these approaches. First, although there is an increasingly robust body of cases where an integrated approach has enhanced our understanding of global health challenges and has led to the development of sustainable and effective mitigation strategies, the case for widespread adoption still has not been convincingly made. In particular, proponents of these approaches have been challenged to demonstrate attribution to improvements in global health outcomes. In addition, there is a critical lack of knowledge on how success in these integrative health initiatives should be documented, evaluated, and shared.

Secondly, while there is a common refrain of the merits of engaging stakeholders and decision-makers across communities, disciplines, and spheres of influence, there is a real lack of understanding of the steps, processes, and institutions which are needed to help manifest this goal.

On January 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) organized a workshop at the 2013 Prince Mahidol Award Conference entitled: *"Cross-sectoral collaboration for health and sustainability: a new agenda for generating and assessing research impact in the face of complexity"*.

This half-day pre-conference workshop convened nearly 60 international researchers, practitioners, policymakers and representatives from donor agencies and international organizations, to address two contemporary challenges in global health research and practice:

1) How do we measure and attribute the success and impact of integrated, transdisciplinary and cross-sectoral research and interventions? Further, how do we effectively and coherently communicate these successes to key global health policymakers?

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<sup>1</sup> One Health Initiative <http://www.onehealthinitiative.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Zinsstag J, Schelling E, Waltner-Toews D, Tanner M: From "one medicine" to "one health" and systemic approaches to health and well-being. *Prev Vet Med* 2010, 101(3-4):148-156.

2) How can we integrate multiple lines of evidence and knowledge in order to achieve gains amongst a family of desired outcomes: the improvement of human and animal health, generation of impact for community members and policymakers, and the promotion of ecological and social sustainability?

This summary report presents the highlights and reflections which emerged from this workshop and its discussions. It is hoped that these key findings will enhance the proficiency of researchers to influence and impact regional and global health policy debates. Further, lessons from the workshop may inform priority setting for future research agendas in international One Health, ecohealth and global health research.

## Workshop Highlights

### Part I: Case Studies

The workshop was opened by Dr. Purvi Mehta-Bhatt (International Livestock Research Institute) who set the stage for the activities and discussions to follow, and introduced four case presentations which highlighted ecohealth as an integrative research approach that can be used to address complex health issues from around the globe.

The four case presentations<sup>3</sup> were given by: Dr. Dominique Charron (International Development Research Centre), Dr. Manish Kakkar (Public Health Foundation of India), Dr. Wang Libin (China Agricultural University) and Dr. Erastus Kang'ethe (University of Nairobi).

An overview of global health research was first provided by Dr. Charron, who described the Ecosystems and Human Health program at the IDRC<sup>4</sup> and its work in supporting ecohealth research initiatives around the world. Dr. Charron explained how integrative approaches such as ecohealth and One Health provide valuable tools for unpacking the nuances and intricacies embedded within contemporary health challenges, and importantly, raise issues of sustainability, community empowerment and gender and equity, in the global health discourse.

This presentation was followed by a showcase of three IDRC-supported ecohealth research initiatives. These researchers described their experiences in conducting ecohealth research and some of the successes and challenges which they have encountered with this approach.

First, Dr. Kakkar presented his team's research on Japanese Encephalitis in India. Through his work, Dr. Kakkar noted the challenge of finding a balance between breadth and depth in ecohealth research, and that a broad and holistic study may lead to compromises in achieving intensity of research focus.

Next, Dr. Wang described changing agricultural trends in China and the rise of 'poultry production clusters' in the poultry industry. In exploring the impact of this style of farming, Dr. Wang explained how an ecohealth approach has helped to bring to the fore, important economic, social and environmental issues which affect the livelihoods of small-scale poultry producers.

Finally, Dr. Kang'ethe talked about cryptosporidiosis as an important health issue for urban smallholder dairy farmers in Kenya. Dr. Kang'ethe explained how his team used outcome mapping<sup>5</sup> as a participatory tool to assess the impact of their work in addressing cryptosporidiosis in Kenya.

### Part II: Key insights and findings

The remainder of the workshop encouraged reflection and discussion among the participants about the previous presentations and their own experiences and insights around two key themes: monitoring, evaluation and the generation of impact in complex health situations; and institutionalizing integrative approaches among global health policies.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.pmaconference.mahidol.ac.th/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=598:2013-side-meeting-tuesday&catid=994:cat-2013-conf](http://www.pmaconference.mahidol.ac.th/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=598:2013-side-meeting-tuesday&catid=994:cat-2013-conf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Programs/Agriculture\\_and\\_the\\_Environment/Ecosystem\\_Approaches\\_to\\_Human\\_Health/Pages/About.aspx](http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Programs/Agriculture_and_the_Environment/Ecosystem_Approaches_to_Human_Health/Pages/About.aspx)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/Pages/IDRCBookDetails.aspx?PublicationID=121>

Two speakers Dr. Sanjeev Sridharan (The Evaluation Centre for Complex Health Interventions<sup>6</sup>) and Dr. Suwit Wibulpolprasert (Ministry of Public Health, Thailand) shared their extensive experiences and insights in these two areas, respectively.

Dr. Sridharan gave an energizing and thought-provoking talk about innovative approaches to monitoring and evaluating initiatives in complex and ‘wicked’ global health situations. In particular, Dr. Sridharan argued that the workshop participants should begin thinking about their work as a narrative and encouraged them to write the “performance story” of their program or project. Such an approach, explained Dr. Sridharan, can help ecohealth researchers and practitioners to piece together the complexities of the problem at hand. Furthermore, narratives provide a powerful way for global health actors to share their lessons and impacts of their efforts.

Dr. Wibulpolprasert recounted his experiences working in the health policy sector in Thailand and shared some effective strategies for engaging leaders and individuals with policy influence. Dr. Wibulpolprasert described tactics such as taking advantage of a public health crisis (such as the current global focus on H7N9), in order to attract the attention of decision-makers. Alternatively, researchers can take advantage of formal governance mechanisms through which health policies are constructed. For instance, Dr. Wibulpolprasert described the National Health Commission in Thailand, a national health policy-making body which has an equal and diverse membership of individuals from the policy sector, civil society and academia.

Following Dr. Sridharan and Dr. Wibulpolprasert’s stimulating discussions, the plenary was broken up into ‘Think Tanks’ – small working groups which were tasked with distilling their experiences and thoughts on monitoring, evaluation and impact in their work, into key insights and recommendations. This led to a lively, engaging and informative discussion among the workshop plenary. Highlights from these discussions are summarized below.

### **Part III: Summary of Think Tank findings**

#### **On monitoring, evaluation and generating impact in complex health situations:**

In thinking about how they can effectively monitor and evaluate their work in complex health situations, the Think Tanks wrestled with a series of challenging concepts and questions such as: *What role does research have in measuring other things that matter (outcomes) as well as evidence? What role do integrated sources of evidence have in coordinated multi-sector decision making?; How is evidence treated differently among disciplines?; Who wants the evidence?; and Who should pay for it?.*

Upon sharing their reflections with the plenary, the bulk of the final discussions on monitoring, evaluation and impact, centered on two key themes.

First, the workshop participants emphasized that a new mode of research and practice was required for global health actors to effectively work in complex health situations. For instance, some participants called on researchers to more strongly embrace uncertainty and complexity, despite the prevailing expectation placed upon researchers to achieve ultimate certainty in their work. With monitoring and evaluation, researchers were urged to be more flexible and adaptive, and be prepared to capture

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.torontoevaluation.ca/evaluatingcomplexity/index.html>

unexpected outcomes. On the topic of identifying M&E indicators amidst uncertainty, one participant remarked that although they may be unclear right now, “we will recognize them when we see them”.

In understanding how to manage uncertainty, ecohealth researchers were encouraged to look towards the social science community as a key source of learning, as social scientists regularly use scientific methodologies that are more accommodating of uncertainty.

Similarly, it was noted that researchers, practitioners and donor agencies often work in time scales which are too short to allow for the manifestation of the ultimate outcomes of projects. To adapt to these short timelines, researchers should try to capture intermediate and incremental indicators of evidence and success. One way for them to do this, is to work closely with community members. In addition to providing valuable perspectives unique from those of donor agencies, this local engagement is useful in building community awareness and can contribute to buy-in for behaviour and policy change.

The second theme discussed by the participants revolved around the use of evidence and knowledge, particularly when working across sectors and disciplines. In discussing how researchers can integrate evidence from different communities and knowledge cultures, it was noted that the biggest challenge may be getting different actors to effectively work together. Indeed, developing collaborative initiatives (particularly those that engage non-academic partners) was seen to be a major obstacle for traditional scientists. This is often due to the divergent motivations and interests which are found within different sectors. For example, scientists may be challenged to work with those in the private sector, whose primary motivation is often financial concerns. Private sector partners may thus reject evidence which runs counter to their self-interests.

To address the operational challenges of intersectoral collaborations, there is a need to develop a systematic strategy to effectively engage different groups and identify their shared interests. Such an approach can prove useful in creating and maintaining consensus and harmony even among diverse partners. Characterizing the priorities, motivations and needs of partners can help researchers to understand the value of engaging different sectors, as at times, this is not abundantly clear.

So significant is the challenge of working with different partners, that some participants saw this as an early but critical marker of success for the work of global health actors. Early progress markers thus might include (simplistic, although often challenging) objectives as “getting the right stakeholders around the table”, or negotiating a consensus among diverse participants on a specific course of action.

### **On achieving global health policy change:**

Think Tank discussions on monitoring, evaluation and impact, connected with their reflections on how researchers can achieve influence and institutional change among global health policymakers. To help orient these discussions, the Think Tanks reflected upon what policymakers’ care about, what they expect from researchers, the constraints and challenges within their expectations, and what would be needed to bring researchers and policymakers closer together.

Several challenges towards the institutionalization of integrative approaches in global health policies were identified. These included: a lack of awareness among policymakers of integrative health approaches; a lack of capacity to tackle the health problems by integrative health approaches; a lack of resources to support further research on One Health or ecohealth; and a lack of working mechanisms to integrate multi-sectoral collaborative initiatives.

To address these challenges, the Think Tanks identified a need for greater donor and institutional support to build capacity for integrative research. They also outlined several opportunities for researchers to achieve a greater impact in global health policies.

The prevailing theme underlying all of these recommendations was communication. In order to effectively reach policymakers, the workshop participants saw a critical need for comprehensive and multi-faceted communications strategies that could facilitate the synthesis of research findings into global health policies. These insights can be captured under some of the core elements of a communications campaign: goal, message, mode, audience, and messenger.

With regards to the goal of the campaign, communications were seen as more than just transmitting an idea or a health-related concept. Instead, communications was seen as an opportunity to build trust with communities and stakeholders. By building strong, trust-based relationships, researchers would be better-placed to fostering important health behaviour changes within communities.

In thinking about the message of that they would be communicating, researchers were first urged to think like policymakers. Where researchers tend to think on longer-time scales, policymakers are only focused on short-term implications and are much more risk-averse – particularly with economic issues. To be effective, messaging would need to take into account these policymakers' needs, priorities and perspectives. For instance, one Think Tank noted that policymakers care about issues of economics, human capital (in particular, education, health and well-being), and issues that might stir public discontent. In order to get attention, researchers need to link their messaging with these priority concerns.

Similarly, another group noted that it may be useful to frame arguments from different perspectives. An argument premised upon scientific evidence may not always be sufficient. At other times, policymakers might respond more strongly to argument bolstered by economic and cost-effectiveness data. One example from a recent ASEAN meeting was highlighted as a good example of research influencing policy. During this meeting, senior officials were considering the implications of malnutrition and food security on national GDPs and their potential return on investments for particular courses of action.

In addition to considering policymakers' perspectives, several participants remarked that communications pieces should emphasize practical and realistic solutions towards complex health problems. A recurring point was that too often, policymakers were unhelpfully presented with problems but not solutions. Instead, policymakers should be provided with the evidence of a health issue, solutions for that problem and a plan for implementation.

The language used in messaging also had to be carefully considered. It was recognized that often, there is a large gap in technical capacity between policymakers and researchers. As such, communications targeted for policymakers must be understandable, relevant and concise.

The mode by which research is communicated was another area of insight. Along with traditional scientific publications, researchers were encouraged to produce complementary communications outputs such as success stories, case studies and best practices documents. Another participant reiterated Dr. Sridharan's earlier emphasis on narrative strategies. Narratives were seen as useful tools which could simplify complex issues into stories which policymakers could understand. For the participant, this was seen as particularly important with ecohealth and One Health research, where researchers tend to over-complicate and make their work inaccessible to non-academic audiences.

Another key recommendation was that the audience of a communications strategy may not always be the policymaker themselves. In fact, it was felt that an effective communications strategy would often have multiple audiences in addition to the policymaker. For instance, policy advisors and policy writers were seen as important individuals to reach. Often times, policy advisors or policy writers may be effective conduits to reach policymakers, as they are often more technically proficient and more receptive to evidence-based communications.

Alternatively, there may be times when it is more effective to create policy change from the bottom-up. For instance, one participant noted that often communities are the quickest to adopt new health behaviours. Creating change within communities may then create upwards action that spurs policy change at higher levels.

Finally, researchers are not always required to be the ‘messenger’. Sometimes communication can be effectively disseminated through change agents such as knowledge brokers or ‘champions’ – individuals who can synthesize knowledge and evidence from multiple sources, and advocate for action. Similarly, there may be opportunities for researchers and policymakers to directly collaborate and co-learn together during the research process and not just interact at the end of a study.

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## Conclusions

This workshop held at the 2013 Prince Mahidol Award Conference, brought together key actors in the global health field with representation from research, practice, policy and the health and development communities, to explore contemporary and critical challenges in global health research and practice. Through case presentations and focussed group discussions, our understanding of the challenges and opportunities for cross-sectoral collaborations to enhance global health and sustainability, was enriched by the thoughtful reflections and experiences shared by the members of this workshop.

As highlighted in this summary report, the workshop participants were able to distill their wide-ranging perspectives, histories, and disciplinary and sectoral backgrounds, into some valuable lessons learned for the group. Indeed, the success of this diverse group in achieving this goal is a lesson on effective, cross-sectoral collaboration, in and of itself.

For global health actors (researchers, practitioners, donor agencies and policymakers), the findings from this workshop encourage us to rethink how we can use diverse perspectives to look for and evaluate our impact, how we can piece together evidence from different communities and sectors to tell a meaningful story about our work, and how we can share our achievements with policymakers, community members and other leaders who can manifest real change. It is hoped that the deliberations, debates and reflections shared in this workshop, will be the start of a larger conversation and will contribute to an increasingly important dialogue on global health and sustainability.

## Appendix: List of Participants

### Workshop Presenters

**Dominique Charron**

International Development Research Centre  
Canada

**Manish Kakkar**

Public Health Foundation of India  
India

**Erastus Kang'ethe**

University of Nairobi  
Kenya

**Zee Leung**

International Development Research Centre  
Canada

**Wang Libin**

China Agricultural University  
China

**Purvi Mehta**

International Livestock Research Institute  
India

**Sanjeev Sridharan**

The Evaluation Centre for Complex Health  
Interventions  
Canada

**Suwit Wibulpolprasert**

Ministry of Public Health  
Thailand

### Invited Participants

**Wiku Adisasmito**

University of Indonesia  
Indonesia

**Robyn Alders**

University of Sydney  
Australia

**Khieu Borin**

CELAGRID  
Cambodia

**Thuy Ha Bui**

Food and Agriculture Organization, Regional Office  
for Asia and the Pacific

**Suwit Chotinun**

Chiang Mai University  
Thailand

**Royce Escolar**

Australian Agency for International Development  
Australia

**Fe Esperanza Espino**

Research Institute for Tropical Medicine  
Philippines

**Lissa Giurissevich**

Australian Agency for International Development  
Australia

**Hector Gomez-Dantes**

National Institute of Public Health  
Mexico

**Le Thi Huong**

Hanoi Medical University  
Vietnam

**Phuong Trang Huynh**

Health Systems Research Institute  
Thailand

**Fang Jing**

Kunming Medical University  
China

**Esron Karimuribo**

Southern African Centre for Infectious Disease  
Surveillance  
Tanzania

**Mohammed Karmali**

Public Health Agency of Canada  
Canada

**Pattamaporn Kittayapong**

Mahidol University  
Thailand

**Frank (Wenjun) Liu**

Chinese Academy of Sciences  
China

**John McDermott**

International Food Policy Research Institute  
USA

**Tata Naipospos**

Centre for Indonesian Veterinary Analytical Studies  
Indonesia

**Hung Nguyen Viet**

Hanoi School of Public Health  
Vietnam

**Asiya Odugleh-Kolev**

World Health Organization  
Switzerland

**Sok King Ong**

Ministry of Health  
Brunei

**Joachim Otte**

Food and Agriculture Organization, Regional Office  
for Asia and the Pacific

**Prasit Palittapongarnpim**

Mahidol University  
Thailand

**Bounlay Phommasack**

Ministry of Health  
Laos

**Parntep Ratanakorn**

Mahidol University  
Thailand

**Le Minh Sat**

Ministry of Science and Technology  
Vietnam

**Pornpit Silkavute**

Health Systems Research Institute  
Thailand

**Les Sims**

Asia Pacific Veterinary Information Services  
Australia

**Boripat Siriaroonrat**

Food and Agriculture Organization, Regional  
Office for Asia and the Pacific

**Amin Soebandrio**

Ministry of Research and Technology  
Indonesia

**Tum Sothyra**

Food and Agriculture Organization  
Thailand

**Lertrak Srikijakarn**

Chiang Mai University  
Thailand

**Luechai Sringernyuang**

Mahidol University  
Thailand

**Banchob Sripa**

Khon Kaen University  
Thailand

**Craig Stephen**

University of Calgary  
Canada

**Nguyen Do Anh Tuan**

Vietnam Centre for Agricultural Policy  
Vietnam

**Suwit Wibulpolprasert**  
Ministry of Public Health  
Thailand

**Amanda Wyatt**  
International Food Policy Research Institute  
USA

**Mat Yamage**  
Food and Agriculture Organization  
Bangladesh

**Yongyuth Yuthavong**  
BIOTEC  
Thailand

**Xiao-Nong Zhou**  
Chinese Center for Disease Control and  
Prevention  
China