

A “culture of impact” – What can research organisations gain from it?

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Public demands for accountable, problem-solving, and impactful research, together with global climate and inequality crises, push research organisations to rethink their impact strategies beyond academic performance indicators based on peer-reviewed publications. Part of these organisations conduct applied research and attempt to assess the effect of their activities on the ground. This is the case for agricultural research organisations, which mission is to improve performances of eco-agri-food systems across all sustainability dimensions. Yet, these assessments have mainly remained concentrated along specific research lines and performance indicators, lacking explicit reflection on the theories of change against which the impact of research should be evaluated. They also tend to prioritize quantitative measures, with the traditional question “which benefits from one invested dollar?” and focus on research outputs (such as publications, patents, technologies, events), less often on understanding the uptake of these outputs by stakeholders, the associated behavioral changes they generate, and the mechanisms underlying those changes. This is encouraged by research-funding mechanisms that tend to favor short-term projects, logic-framework exercises, and projects’ output rather than behavioral change and impact per se. More in-depth considerations are necessary to examine research through the prism of impact, at both research organisation and wider research ecosystem levels.

WHAT’S AT STAKE

The French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (Cirad), the Brazilian Agricultural Research Corporation (Embrapa), and the Colombian Agricultural Research Corporation (AGROSAVIA) are agricultural research organisations that place “impact” at the core of their ambition. They have invested on developing impact assessment methods and approaches, and explored new practices enabling staff and researchers to reflect on the impacts of their activities. These three organisations have paved the way towards establishing what they call a “culture of impact”. We provide here insights on different models of deployment of such a culture, and we offer practical recommendations and develop a case to make it common practice in relevant research institutions.

A CULTURE OF IMPACT IN A RESEARCH ORGANISATION – WHAT IS IT AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

A “culture of impact” is an organisational recognition that impact concerns everyone in the organisation. In other words, it argues that applied research is to be designed and practiced integrating a reflection on the impacts it aims to generate. A culture of impact aims to encourage the research community to reflect upon its role in contributing to long-term societal change, equip and support researchers to carry out this reflection and adjust their practices accordingly, and implement strategies to infuse such a culture throughout the organisation.

Blundo Canto et al. (2019) have shown, with the case of Cirad, that a culture of impact in an agricultural research organisation relies on: i) transdisciplinary dialogue on the multiple roles and functions played by researchers; ii) adaptability to different needs, lexicon and functions to foster appropriation of impact evaluation approaches; iii) institutional buy-in through support by management and inclusion in the organisation’s strategy and vision; iv) capacity reinforcement of staff in understanding the impacts of research and network building; v) financial resources dedicated to develop and sustain the culture; and vi) communication and partnerships to promote this culture within and outside the organisation. **How far do organisations go with sustaining these components?** This brief builds upon a follow-up study (Ferré et al. 2025) that tackles this question, broadening the scope to two other applied research organisations that are Embrapa and AGROSAVIA.

A culture of impact = “An organisational aspiration to design, plan, and conduct research through the eyes of the types of impact it aims to contribute to, involving a conducive organisational environment [...] and translating into the staff and partners feeling both consciously aligned within the research system and key to directing research activities in a way that contribute to the generation of socio-economic and environmental impacts.” (Ferré et al. 2025)

Cirad operates in the global South as a research cooperation institute, whilst Embrapa and AGROSAVIA serve national mandates on agricultural research, respectively in Brazil and Colombia. All three have impact evaluation and reflexive practices embedded into their organisational operations - at levels of institutionalisation not commonly seen in the sector. Workshops among representatives of these organisations, combined with primary data collection via interviews and surveys with staff who engaged in impact-reflexion related activities, made it possible to compare motivations, implementation trajectories, and internal intended and unintended effects of a “culture of impact”.

CULTURE OF IMPACT FOR LEARNING AND TRANSFORMING RESEARCH PRACTICES

We found that the three organisations share similar reasons for developing a culture of impact: a summative/accountability purpose to demonstrate and communicate impact of research, and a learning aspiration to better understand how research contributes to societal impact. Beside the “value for money” argument, growing evidence highlights the value of insights along the multi-dimensional impacts that research contributes to generate and the understanding of the causal mechanisms underlying these changes. It is not just about providing and reporting numbers to prove usefulness of research – it is also about capturing HOW research generates impact and FOR WHOM, and therefore about the learning process that results from it, which in turn helps to better design future research interventions for enhanced impacts.

The learning purpose expresses differently. We found that in the example of Cirad, learning is oriented towards improving research practices by better reflecting on research impact pathways and fostering multi-actor participatory approaches to appreciate their roles in research processes. The case is slightly different for Embrapa, where learning focuses on the collection of systematic data across organisational activities for demonstrating organisational performance, enabling adaptive management of innovations, to maximize adoption rates and technological performance. Despite commonalities around processing knowledge and impact evaluation results, one sees that learning process can be either centered around individual practices, or turned towards informing strategic planning and organisational decisions and investments (e.g., in terms of research priorities, investment in technologies).

A CULTURE OF IMPACT CAN TAKE MANY FORMS

The introduction of any new culture and therefore new norms and habits within an organisation takes time. Cirad, Embrapa, and AGROSAVIA have gone through progressive evolution and similar patterns in their building of a culture of impact. All have implemented methodological reflections, capacity building and networking efforts, creating knowledge sharing spaces, and developing impact evaluation tools and methods, and dedicated human and financial resources. Thus, it takes a continuum of efforts driven by a mix of methodological, organisational, and scientific pathways.

Yet, each organisation deployed a culture of impact in its own way. Cirad, for instance, has put much effort in raising awareness among researchers and partners along the importance and usefulness of thinking through how research contributes to societal change. This has taken place through detailed retrospective (*ex post*) analyses of long-term past research programs, subsequent identification of key lessons (see Faure et al., 2018, 2020), and the design of a unique approach for supporting plausible and co-constructed strategic planning of impact-oriented future research (*ImpresS ex ante*). Embrapa started its journey with a focus on systematizing impact analyses across agricultural technologies and innovations developed by the organisation, in order to adapt and prioritize research, and advance social communication (NB: a similar trend was observed within the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research - CGIAR). AGROSAVIA followed this path, by adapting the method developed at EMBRAPA to their own needs and purposes (see [Balanço Social](#)

[Embrapa; Balance Social AGROSAVIA](#)). Notably, these organisations have been maintaining methodological dialogues with other organisations, as they work on continuously improving and reviewing their own approaches. In particular, Cirad collaborated closely in 2010s with INRAE (National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food and Environment) and FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) along designing impact evaluation methods that be suitable to agricultural research, and maintained methodological exchanges with IRD (Institute of Research for development), WUR (Wageningen University & Research, NL), CGIAR, and AFD (French Development Agency) as well (see for instance Saint-Martin et al., 2011).

Modalities of engagement of staff into impact-related approaches also vary. At Cirad, internal processes carried out voluntarily by research teams and their partners (with methodological support from dedicated staff) were fostered, while in Embrapa and AGROSAVIA, they take the form of systematic yearly procedures with a strong level of formalization, and the production of large organisational datasets. Whereas each model offers its own pros and cons, instruments and measures that can enable both accountability and internal reflexivity are highly relevant in current times. This is what Cirad offers via [ImpresS](#): accessible tools, approaches, and support that can be used i) in flexible and customized manners, favouring ownership by actors engaged, ii) on a voluntary basis – following a principle that reflexivity can rarely be carried out in constrained conditions, and (less so) iii) for capitalization, accountability exercises, e.g., to feed formal purposes. On the other side, the model followed at EMBRAPA and AGROSAVIA fosters systematic and formalized organizational-level accountability and communication.

AN EYE OPENER FOR NEW INSPIRATIONS

The introduction of a culture of impact can initially be perceived by staff as burdensome or a creativity inhibitor, leading to possible resistance in engaging into impact-related questioning and practices. Interviews reported that this perception tends to evolve, as researchers and staff recognise its broader benefits beyond impact assessment, individually and collectively, and especially the ability to better visualize one's role in the continuum research to development.

While there is no baseline on which to rely on for measuring this trend with precision, the study reveals that a shift in impact thinking in the three organisations has been happening, as they start palpating the changes and the new dynamics that are impelled through a culture of impact.

At **organisational level**, the study revealed that establishing such a culture went hand-in-hand with the development at management level of visions and strategies that include “impact” at their core. This was done for the case of Cirad through the [Strategic Vision](#) (Cirad, 2017) and planning documents (Objectives of Scientific and Partnership Strategies - OSSPs), enabling stronger communication about impact and implementation of a common lexicon. One instrumental organisational element that is shared by the three cases is the creation of dedicated “impact teams”, made of both support agents and researchers, with the mission to develop and adapt impact evaluation approaches, and support their use. The three organisations also count on “brokering” or “bridging” people between the “impact team” and research units, as a way to further diffuse impact-oriented practices.

At **individual levels**, the majority of staff from the three organisations who have been engaged into impact-related

RECOMMENDATIONS

Establishing cultures of impact should be part of every research organisation's responsibility, even more for organisations that display an applied research mandate. This means that the broader research ecosystem, made also of funders, policy makers, and evaluating instances also have "a card to play" in supporting this culture. Based on the findings of our study, we make the following **three key recommendations** to facilitate *cultures of impact* in research.

Foster a learning culture

A learning environment is achieved through offering and making accessible a diversity of impact-oriented approaches, methods, arenas, along which staff, regardless of their expertise and interest can feel comfortable to grasp, engage with, and try out. The flexibility of the methods in their implementation will suit different publics and needs. For instance, in Cirad, ImpresS *ex ante* is completely adaptable to the need of the group that is in demand, and ImpresS team also adjusts its degree and modalities of accompagnement accordingly. Organisational knowledge synthesis

activities reported gain of knowledge, along impact evaluation principles, notions, skills, and abilities for approaching research with an "impact mindset". This transpires into being able to more plausibly identify the types of change that the research will contribute to generate, at different time horizons, or better target the actors that will be directly or indirectly concerned by a future research. One person from Cirad reported that impact evaluation approaches have enabled to *"strengthen the transition of farmers from beneficiaries to actors, and to acquire the reflex of 'actor-centred' questioning: with whom? for whom? by whom? who should do what differently?"* when planning for a research activity.

In addition, we found that this culture has fostered interdisciplinary collaborations bringing people together from different backgrounds and initiate collaborative exercises, e.g., around the construction of shared visions of future research or agricultural technologies, or reflecting back along past research processes. One researcher from AGROSAVIA explained: *"the evaluations are interdisciplinary works, so we are in constant interaction with people from other disciplines and professions and we are constantly learning"*. Some also reported to have reinforced their conviction of the importance of interacting with farmers in order to better identify their perceptions and needs. This culture influenced, for many, the way of formulating and constructing research questions, in a way that is more grounded and consistent with stakeholders' interests.

Though the study did not investigate the research unit or team level, we see that some of the individual changes also affect collective levels. The multi-disciplinary and participatory tools for instance, employed during strategic planning exercises (e.g., with ImpresS *ex ante*) enable to refine expectations and ambitions, and reach a shared understanding of stakeholders roles and the research objectives.

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mechanisms, a key component of learning, that enable creating continuity in research works and capturing lessons from impact evaluation exercises, can then be used to inform decision-making processes, as is the case for the formalized yearly reports of EMBRAPA and AGROSAVIA and the ad-hoc reports of ImpresS. Such mechanisms also help valuing everyone's contribution to impact evaluation, and continuously improve practices. Learning also occurs through regular exchanges with peer and partner' organisations, to stimulate ideas and share experiences; and with funders to decipher what works and what does not under different conditions.

Invest in uniquely skilled and committed human resources

A culture of impact requires dedicated human resources, for developing impact evaluation approaches and tools, supporting their application, accompagnying teams, and making this culture visible, inside and outside the organisation. This can translate into recruiting mediation/pedagogical engineers able to facilitate dialogue among diverse disciplines and professions, as well as research staff with multidisciplinary backgrounds, able to understand and bridge disciplines. This also includes dedicated financial resources, from the organisation and from funders, to implement impact evaluations on a regular basis.

Facilitate stakeholders' engagement

The early involvement of stakeholders concerned by the research activities is key. This involvement may not necessarily need to happen across all phases of the research process, but it is a question that needs to be well reflected by the research teams. There are many ways of doing it, and many associated benefits to it. Engaging stakeholders in place-based research will allow to reach a better understanding of the historical context and actors' landscape, design more plausible and contextually meaningful research activities, and more carefully understand actors' power dynamics. All this together will contribute to enhance the relevance and timeliness of the research, and therefore the contribution to generating positive impact. Engaging with relevant policy-makers in due time can help enhance research relevance and plan from the onset for the effective use of research results.

CONCLUSION

There is now broad consensus that research organisations must strategically invest in evaluating and communicating the societal relevance of their work and achievements. It is high time for applied public research organisations to walk beyond a focus on research per se, and integrate impact-oriented priorities. As expressed by one study's participant, a culture of impact *"enables the organisation's values to be put into practice"*. Through the study upon which this brief is built, we have shown that integrating a «culture of impact» in a research organisation can be challenging and lengthy, but it opens up new research and partnership opportunities, and is eventually a source of fulfillment, inspiration, and new motivations across the board. Approaches and engagement vary according to organisational environment and core values, but the bottom line remains that dedicated financial and human resources, along with a balance of flexible approaches and systematic processes, are critical. As researchers increasingly see impact-driven practices as opportunities to enhance the quality and relevance of their work, funders play a crucial role in supporting this shift and fostering more transformative research at scale. In sum, actors of the research system, as partners in contributing to transformative research, need **to join forces** in creating conducive conditions to a culture of impact.

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References and other links



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