

## **Group facilitation in CGIAR: experiences and lessons from international agricultural research organizations**

*Simone Staiger-Rivas, Ewen Le Borgne, Michael Victor, Juergen Hagmann, Cristina Sette and Petr Kosina*

This article describes CGIAR's experience with group facilitation over 10 years. CGIAR is a global partnership that unites organizations engaged in research for a food-secure future. Including 15 research centers with a total of nearly 9,000 staff, CGIAR embarked a decade ago on an effort to improve how teams meet, think collectively, and make decisions. Inspired by participatory approaches, which had been used since the 1980s to involve farmers in research, the leaders of this effort aimed to tackle challenges faced by research teams and partnerships, and since then, the need for more effective stakeholder engagement and the consequent demand for group facilitation have steadily increased. Based on the experiences of the co-authors, a survey, complemented by follow-up conversations with CGIAR in-house facilitators and researchers, as well as professional consultant-facilitators and partners, this case study analyzes the evolution of facilitation, its added value, and current trends. In addition, the authors discuss the different ways and contexts in which facilitators have worked in CGIAR and some of the facilitation essentials that emerge from the author's enquiry. This article should be of particular interest to knowledge management practitioners working in research and development, as it offers hints on how to position facilitation as an essential tool for stakeholder engagement and participatory decision-making in research-for-development organizations.

**Keywords:** facilitation; international agricultural research; research for development; participation; CGIAR

### **Embracing change: origins of facilitation in CGIAR**

Like most other major contributors to agricultural development, CGIAR<sup>1</sup> is constantly changing in an effort to better satisfy the evolving needs of its beneficiaries and contribute more effectively to the aims of reducing hunger and poverty, providing more nutritious food, and managing natural resources more sustainably. CGIAR's interest in facilitation has resulted from three major trends described below.

### **Increased development focus**

Over the last 25 years, CGIAR has moved from a research pipeline approach to a more development-focused research agenda. The most recent indication of this is the creation of CGIAR research programs, which give particular attention to achieving development impact through broad partnerships. In previous years, CGIAR had steadily widened its research agenda and diversified its partnerships<sup>2</sup>. This, in turn, stimulated growth in global stakeholder interactions and diversification of multi-disciplinary teams with different cultural backgrounds. Those changes have posed greater challenges in terms of organizational culture and performance, requiring researchers and their managers to develop capacity for facilitating complex projects, team dynamics or to involve professional facilitators, as needed. As former director general of the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), Carlos Sere<sup>3</sup>, puts it, facilitation has been crucial for fostering the Institution's core business, which is innovation, through enhanced partner engagement and stakeholder participation. For this purpose, it has been useful to involve facilitators with ample knowledge of techniques and of the research-for-development context as well as the institutional culture and environment.

### **Increased impact focus**

In the mid-1990s, CGIAR began paying more attention to the impact of its research. Jürgen Hagmann, who has done facilitation in CGIAR for many years, says that CGIAR's increased impact orientation was a key driver for facilitation. From the mid-1990s to mid-2000s, fund agencies urged the use of logical frameworks in research projects, and starting in 2005, all CGIAR centers were required to develop medium-term plans (MTPs). Related planning meetings were facilitated and contributed to more effective use of the MTPs. However, while the new planning tools helped organize research activities on paper, Hagmann says, they had little effect on research processes and the delivery of results, even as the pressure to deliver outcomes and achieve impact continued to grow.

In recent years, CGIAR has reaffirmed<sup>4</sup> its sharper focus on impact, making results-based management (RBM) essentially the norm. This, in turn, has created renewed demand for professional facilitation and convinced research leaders that meeting organizers bring good returns on the investment. "High-quality facilitation, says Hagmann can contribute by helping to ensure tangible outcomes despite the diversity of interests, perceptions, cultures, and scientific disciplines.

<b>Textbox 1: Training in group facilitation: experience and impact</b>
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ILAC organized a series of 4-day training courses on group facilitation, which were led by Sam Kaner of Community At Work<sup>5</sup>. The idea was to strengthen the capacity of CGIAR and partner organization staff to facilitate group decision making. A total of 160 people attended the courses from 2005 to 2010, 80% were researchers. The courses succeeded in introducing the basic principles of facilitation and raising awareness of their importance among researchers and senior management in CGIAR.

According to an ILAC report (Sette and Watts, 2010) the number of facilitated events has greatly increased since 2005, and meetings have become more participatory. Most participants in the workshop (87% of 63 responses) went on to facilitate meetings regularly. The evaluation also found that the meetings were more productive, gave rise to better agreements, and produced more creative solutions, as a consequence of the facilitation techniques used. Even those participants, who did not become regular facilitators, were important as they better understood, supported and promoted facilitation and alternative approaches to meetings within the CGIAR.

The Priorities and Strategies Committee (PSC) meetings of Bioversity International (Kaner, 2008), one of the CGIAR research centers, provides a good example of how the training was applied. Kaner's Gradients-of-Agreement polling procedure was used to improve decision making. Before the director general finalized a decision, each PSC member expressed his or her level of agreement on a seven-point scale, and the poll results were recorded and displayed on a simple Excel spreadsheet. Once all PSC members had been polled, each in turn explained why he or she agreed or disagreed with the proposed course of action. Based on the reasons given, the director general modified the proposal.

### **Growing desire for better knowledge sharing**

In 2000, CGIAR embarked on initiatives aimed at increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of research through improvements in knowledge sharing and institutional learning. Initially, two entry points were created for addressing these issues and in the process for mainstreaming facilitation techniques. First, in 2005, a knowledge sharing project established by CGIAR's Information and communications technology and knowledge management Program (ICT-KM) organized a series of pilot initiatives in selected centers to introduce new ways of designing and facilitating major meetings (Staiger 2005, Staiger 2005, Russell 2005). And second, the Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative and ICT-KM Program held a short-term training course on group facilitation, which was then repeated several times by ILAC (see Textbox 1). A scientist, who participated in one of this training course, recently stated that:

*The training gave staff confidence to begin with, and built individual and institutional interest. The training provided a set of tools to those who wanted to try them out.*

*Facilitation is not for everybody, but those who have interest and attitude should receive training.*

## **Changing approaches to facilitation**

As CGIAR's sharper focus on development and impact intensified the need for knowledge sharing and facilitation continued to gain importance, and the number of facilitated meetings increased. CGIAR facilitators realized over time that their role was not just to help others perform specific tasks, using diverse techniques, or to develop meeting agendas, or to use colored cards and dots in clever ways. They discovered that facilitation is more about enabling people to interact in ways that build and strengthen relationships, resulting in commitment to joint endeavors focused on solving problems.

To take stock of the current status and perceptions on group facilitation, the authors of this paper invited CGIAR staff and partners in October 2014 to participate in a survey with the objective of analyzing the evolution, added value, lessons learned, and current trends of facilitation within CGIAR. The survey received 133 responses, 83% from CGIAR staff and 17% by partners, and some responses from independent consultants. Partner organizations who responded to the survey are UN agencies, universities, and civil society organizations. Most respondents are based in Asia (34%), and Africa (25%), followed by Latin America / Caribbean (20%), and Europe (15%). Respondents are senior researchers (29%), communications and knowledge management professionals (23%), senior managers (16%), consultants (12%), junior managers (9%), and administrators (7%). In addition, to deepen the feedback received through the survey, the authors interviewed 1) CGIAR staff who practice group facilitation, 2) researcher colleagues from a broad range of perspectives (some do not use facilitation, others call upon internal and external facilitation support), and 3) external consultant-facilitators.

According to this survey 70% of the respondents perceive and appreciate the increased use of facilitation in meetings and events. They highlight the importance of gearing facilitation to stakeholders' expectations and of respecting people's time and effort. Respondents see facilitation as an effective means to gain a better understanding of partners' needs, strengths and weaknesses, especially during planning or needs assessment meetings. Facilitation, they state, narrows the gaps by engaging actively with different types of stakeholders and therefore increasing collaboration among them. Facilitation also helps people think outside the box, connect ideas, deal more successfully with complex issues, and understand each other better, despite cultural and disciplinary differences. In addition, it can orient group dynamics to outcomes, support subsequent monitoring and evaluation and help overcome political and power struggles.

The dialogues with scientists who have experience working with facilitators specifically highlight the need for the facilitator to have good knowledge about the topic. Process should not dominate over the content, and therefore many prefer in-house facilitation. However, there is no agreement about the added-value of facilitation, some being very skeptical (‘I have limited patience for round tables and world cafes’), some being convinced about the gains (‘There are still too many colleagues who are not valuing enough good facilitation and investing in it’).

In the following section we digest the results of the different enquiries of the authors into six facilitation essentials that seem to represent the current state of the art and must-haves of group facilitation.

### **Facilitation essentials**

The survey, interviews with facilitators and scientists, as well as the authors’ experience all underline a growing demand for ‘effective’ meetings. Based on those enquiries, the authors suggest that new expectations can be met if the meeting organizer and facilitator can deliver on six imperatives: (1) being equipped with theory and tools, (2) co-designing a coherent process that leads to the desired outcomes, (3) finding common ground, (4) facilitating online, (5) creating and maintaining stakeholder bonds, and (6) accelerating change by facilitating wider and deeper (social learning) processes. Below we expand on each of these facilitation essentials.

#### **Being equipped with theory and tools**

According to consultant-facilitator Nancy White<sup>6</sup>, experienced facilitators rely on a range of theoretical approaches to maximize the benefits. She highlights, for example, Snowden’s Cynefin Framework<sup>7</sup>, which emphasizes the need to distinguish simple, complicated, complex, and chaotic dynamics, each requiring different facilitation approaches (such as categorizing issues, planning scenarios, managing patterns, and crisis management). She also cites ‘Liberating Structures’, an approach that questions ‘the conventional structures that are used to organize how people routinely work’ and lead to ‘dysfunctional and wasted ideas’<sup>8</sup>. Another approach is to facilitate group dynamics from a community of practice perspective, emphasizing the importance of community formation, the community’s domain of interest, and the kind of practices that strengthen the community and foster learning. To create trust among meeting owners and facilitators, Nancy keeps the tool or theory in the background, as she feels that new approaches can be perceived as a risk. It is more effective, she says, to use a given approach, afterwards analyze with participants what happened, and only then reveal the theory. Survey respondents appear to agree, suggesting that they expected facilitators to

use innovative methods and tools but get nervous when meeting design and preparation become long and complex. This is specifically true for scientists who do want to keep the focus on content and outputs. Some feel that the applied facilitation techniques are too often used to “harvest the same ideas again and again instead of leading to closure.”

### **Co-designing a coherent process that leads to the desired outcomes**

In the authors’ experience, far too many meetings are conducted without a clear and logical process design or without a design that carefully balances information pushing and knowledge sharing or reflection. Often, facilitators are brought in at a late stage when the organizers have already a program and sometimes even a process in mind, which from a professional facilitation point of view cannot deliver the desired results. Typically, these agendas handed over to the facilitator(s) too late display one or more of these characteristics: Far too many presentations, limited group work and interaction time, a disconnect with the desired outputs, and too many formalities inhibit the achievement of results, no matter how many participatory tools and techniques are applied. Turning around the organizers’ agenda is often the biggest challenge, even for an experienced professional facilitator. This causes discomfort, as often the program was developed far in advance, and the number of presenters has already been confirmed but must then be reduced. The meeting or event will only deliver high-quality outputs if the process design is coherent and then well facilitated.

### **Finding common ground**

Far too many meetings and events are planned without allowing enough time for participants to get to know each other’s perspectives. Therefore, facilitation, to be effective, must start by outlining the purpose of the activity. One aspect of the process that is often neglected concerns the preparedness of participants to make decisions, understand why this particular activity is happening in the first place, or what is expected from them by all parties. So, it is key at the very beginning of any activity, to create opportunities for participants to find common ground. This makes for more positive meeting dynamics, as one survey respondent noted:

*Facilitation has been particularly successful in getting a diverse group to recognize common interests/goals and then to see around differences to focus on opportunity to collaborate. Otherwise, the differences would have stopped the conversation from the beginning.*

## Facilitating online

Survey participants note that virtual facilitation is increasing in response to the growing complexity and decentralization of partnerships, and to limits on travel. As on-line platforms improve, electronic media are being used for social reporting (live documentation of events), facilitated expert consultations, webinars, and computer-assisted brainstorming.

Technological breakthroughs have given rise to a proliferation of virtual conferencing facilities<sup>9</sup>. Social media have resulted in more emphasis being given to personal learning networks<sup>10</sup> and “personal knowledge mastery.”<sup>11</sup> Today, it is easy to document and collaborate online (e.g., through wikis and real time collaboration tools), to share and spread ideas (via Twitter, Facebook, etc.), to invite people around the globe to participate in conversations (via Twitterchats, streaming events, etc.), and to upload documents to specific repositories (e.g., pictures on Flickr, presentations on Slideshare, videos on YouTube or Vimeo, etc.), and this has made organizing and tracking events easier and more attractive.

### Textbox 2: Write-shops for participatory impact pathway analysis

The CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF) pioneered a multi-stakeholder approach in 2010-2014 based on participatory impact pathway analysis (PIPA) combined with the writeshop methodology. PIPA is a participatory method for planning, monitoring and evaluation that promotes learning and provides a framework for research on change (Victor, 2014). PIPA seeks outcomes and changes in knowledge, attitudes, and skills which serve as the starting point for research planning (as opposed to starting with problems and related research outputs). The writeshop methodology was used in combination with PIPA to foster collaboration within and between projects. Each project was designed to have a multi-stakeholder team representing research institutions, universities, civil society, government organizations, and the private sector.

Facilitation of the interactive writeshops was crucial. First, the PIPA process required heavy facilitation and coaching to ensure that proposals were outcome oriented and that research outputs were relevant to the desired outcomes. Second, writeshops provided the right context for interaction between projects and created a shared understanding of how each project was contributing to a larger outcome.

Interviewed researchers have been using almost no facilitation for virtual meetings. Also most agree that it is important, they wonder how to really get it done effectively. One researcher states: “Expert facilitation is very much concerned with group dynamics and the combination of verbal and visual communications between participants. To this day, virtual meeting technologies cannot cater to these dimensions.”

Nancy White nicely summarizes the challenges of online facilitation. She believes that having better online meetings is crucial, as we tend to adopt bad habits from face-to-face meetings and bring them into online spaces. She also stresses the importance of facilitating asynchronous discussions (like those on Slack or Yammer) to ensure engagement and participation over time. Another challenge is to stimulate effective and continued online participation for researchers belonging to many groups and networks. Since the technology is still far from perfect, Nancy suggests, it is important to always have an alternative in case of technology failure. Technology stewardship --meaning for Nancy White having enough experience of the workings of a community to understand its technology needs, and enough experience with technology to take leadership in addressing those needs-- should be part of the service that an online facilitator provides.

### **Creating and maintaining stakeholder bonds**

For longer term engagement that goes beyond specific meetings, creating bonds is especially important, as many of the scientists and other actors from diverse sectors may not be used to working together, do not use the same terminologies or focus on the same levels of intervention. Most of them did not have a chance to integrate their research agendas and activities beforehand and thus require a fair amount of alignment. In practice, this means that facilitation has to become more engaging, participatory, interactive, and action-oriented.

Helping others create bonds has been one of the objectives of Nadia Manning-Thomas, a consultant who previously worked in a CGIAR center and is now a consultant with the CGIAR Consortium Office which supports research centers to communicate and collaborate among themselves; explore opportunities to improve efficiency; adopt best practices; and share knowledge<sup>12</sup>. To this end, various communities of practice (such as directors general and specialists in knowledge management, intellectual property, to mention a few) were created, and Nadia has been handling virtual and face-to-face facilitation for many of them. She has observed<sup>13</sup> that participants and organizers are starting to recognize and value the required skill sets. Increasingly involved in designing meetings and engaging with participants before the meeting and through post-workshop activities, Nadia highlights two challenges that must be dealt with to create lasting bonds between meeting participants: One is to prevent the owners of meetings from delegating too much authority and not assuming their full responsibilities. Another is sustaining momentum within communities of practice. This requires a long-term effort with community of practice leaders to find the best ways to encourage sustained interactions and conversations.

### **Accelerating change by facilitating wider and deeper (social learning) processes**

Facilitation techniques are increasingly applied to solve real-world problems. In CGIAR, facilitation initially focused on improving meetings through the use of selected facilitation techniques to change how people interact. But there is a growing awareness that transforming



the research process requires more profound types of facilitation based on the principles of organizational development and change management. This is the case for facilitation at the local level, involving innovation platforms (Rooyen, 2013) and other such mechanisms, as the main change required often involves institutional arrangements and changes in the mindsets and attitudes of the actors.

A study, commissioned by the CGIAR Research Program on Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (Gonsalves 2013) revealed 120 different approaches that foster social learning. Facilitation that fosters social learning is complex, challenging, and involves a wider set of stakeholders, who have diverse interests. It requires a high level of communication, process facilitation, and leadership (Merrey, 2013). A CGIAR social scientist and facilitator at heart states that, “facilitation helps with critical reflection and learning, such as in learning alliances or innovation platforms. Process facilitation is critical, as it runs on social capital, and that is what makes research work: People doing their best thinking, exposing issues, having adversities, and working through it, bringing the group where they have not been before.”

Facilitators who responded to the survey also consider their work with processes oriented to end-users, such as events focusing on stakeholder engagement, to be the most important. As one survey respondent put it: “There is a need to increase and adapt facilitation to the end-user level as a way to assure continuity, from research to development, enable innovation, learning on the ground, and avoid exit problems. This requires the facilitation of whole processes. It includes the facilitation of “often quite conflicting” stakeholder relationships [...] as well as the use of tools and methods (i.e., role playing or storytelling) that are adapted to different cultural contexts.”

CGIAR in-house facilitators would like to be put into a position to act more as a knowledge broker and process facilitator around social learning. In this context, they express, that the interaction and learning between institutional approaches (such as facilitating internal planning meetings) and research approaches (e.g. facilitating an innovation platform), could be more explicit and fruitful.

Now, here arises the question of the limits between process facilitation and project management and the respective roles of facilitators and project leaders. ILRI’s Peter Ballantyne<sup>14</sup> wonders if facilitators take responsibility for facilitating a whole project process, this creates the risk that they will get caught up in project management. He suggests that facilitators should intervene in specific parts of the process and thus complement the work of research managers who should be process sensitive. From another perspective, Jürgen Hagmann warns about the dangers of bringing scientists too much into process management,

which can take valuable time from science. He sees facilitators as brokers between science and management, who should ðengage ó allow scientists to go back to science ó engage.ö

In the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food, facilitation was interpreted more broadly. It was not limited to workshops but rather involved continuous engagement with stakeholders focused on building relationships and working with them. Leaders of research in major river basins were asked to facilitate and lead engagement with multiple stakeholders. This required them to understand the political and social contexts, institutional mandates, and stakeholders and determine how to make research more effective. This role also required research managers to learn the basics of facilitation, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge brokering.

### **Where do we go from here?**

The tendency in CGIAR toward increased facilitation in meetings and events is likely to continue, as the CGIAR research agenda becomes steadily more complex and multi-stakeholder consultations multiply at every level, from the grassroots to global arenas. The meetings will involve more and more diverse people, and will create new demands for external and in-house facilitators, while also requiring other professionals to acquire expertise in facilitation basics.

### **Go beyond ‘patchy process literacy’**

There has been a tendency in CGIAR to separate ‘engagement processes’ and ‘science’. CGIAR managers took almost a decade to get a better understanding of the importance of process, and the interviews with scientists who work with facilitators show that there is a concern about process ‘overkill’. The conscious attention to process ó we call it process literacy-- is not yet really institutionalized, and facilitation still requires active promotion across the board. While the pockets of success are known, they still remain islands of success: the ICT-KM program activities related to knowledge sharing, the ILAC papers and training courses focusing on facilitation, the approach to events followed by ILRI<sup>15</sup> ([documented on this wiki](#)), the CPWF focus on quality learning through facilitated processes, CIAT’s focus on embedding facilitation and knowledge management at the core of research.

As CGIAR research becomes more results- and development-oriented, process matters and research teams will have to move towards facilitation that supports longer term processes. The efforts to bring process literacy to the next level will help maximize the skills we have built over time and they will help us get away from patchy results to institutionalizing facilitation.

### **Position facilitation strategically**

Facilitation can profoundly change the way people think, work, and make decisions together. The authors and many interviewees expect now more strategic use of facilitation to improve meetings and post-meeting follow-up.

Some facilitators, like Nadia Manning, would like to see more capacity development, knowledge exchange, and learning among facilitators, so they can learn new techniques (such as the use of body language and graphic facilitation) and gain incentives to grow professionally. No CGIAR network of facilitators exists to provide such opportunities for individual and collective efforts to organize information, share knowledge, promote learning, with the aim of moving facilitation beyond random events. According to the survey, most in-house facilitators do not have this activity in their terms of reference, which helps explain why facilitation is often seen as a well-liked add-on instead of a strategic tool for achieving sensible and participatory decision-making.

A senior consultant-facilitator expresses his concern about the slow progress in positioning facilitation strategically in CGIAR. “As much as CGIAR has been talking about partnership, he says, it is striking how little is happening on the ground around facilitation skills. While CGIAR staff understand the rhetoric of collaboration much more clearly today-- they know that if you don’t involve farmers in the technology, there’s no point for the technology” it is surprising how little is invested in the skills that are required for successful collaboration. How can it be that it’s not part of their job description?”

In the absence of incentives to strengthen their professional skills, in-house facilitators are unlikely to bring about the changes needed to help make collaborative research processes more efficient and effective. A common challenge for in-house facilitators involves power dynamics and vested interests in their own organization, where they too are stakeholders. Given these limitations, there must be more clarity about the type of facilitation required for particular events and processes to ensure that the right capacities are available. One can then decide whether an outside professional is needed to facilitate a change process or an in-house facilitator is sufficient to improve a meeting. Managers of organizations and programs must take those criteria into account in order to make the right decisions.

### **Conclusions**

This case study analyzed the evolution of facilitation, its added value, and current trends in a consortium of international agricultural research centers. The authors explored the different

ways and contexts in which facilitators have worked and some of the facilitation essentials that emerge from the author's enquiry.

Facilitation of group dynamics in our institutional and research settings is mission critical for achieving the expected development goals. Sound facilitation assures inclusiveness of stakeholders' perspectives, provides a framework for monitoring, evaluation and learning, contributes to make research gender sensitive, and makes teams work at its best.

Whatever future strategic decisions will bring, each and every one of the CGIAR staff will have to get smarter at process literacy and strategic facilitation so as to:

- Clarify our own learning and development objectives;
- Connect and engage with others in long-lasting, bonding ways, both online and offline;
- Remain sharp and connected on our own fields of expertise;

The combination of intentional and personal effectiveness and connectedness has the power to leverage real change in the CGIAR system and in agricultural research because it brings together bright professionals who are capable of connecting and bonding with others across disciplines. Systemic change starts with individual change.

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### About the authors

*Simone Staiger-Rivas* is leader of Knowledge Management at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture ([www.ciat.org](http://www.ciat.org)) where she works on data and information management, knowledge management in research processes and internal communications. Simone has been involved in facilitation at CGIAR for the past 9 years.

<http://ciatblogs.cgiar.org/knowledgemanagement/> Email: [s.staiger@cgiar.org](mailto:s.staiger@cgiar.org)

*Ewen Le Borgne* is team leader Knowledge, Engagement and Collaboration at the International Livestock Research Institute ([www.ilri.org](http://www.ilri.org)) where he works on knowledge management, communication and monitoring & learning activities across various projects in Ethiopia and Africa. Ewen is a senior editor of the [Knowledge Management for Development Journal](http://www.km4dev.org). He blogs (personally) on: <http://km4meu.wordpress.com>. Email: [e.leborgne@cgiar.org](mailto:e.leborgne@cgiar.org)

*Michael Victor* is a communication and rural development specialist with more than 20 years of experience. He has worked at the local level developing processes to improve knowledge exchange between different stakeholder (farmer-to-farmer, local platforms, and village extension systems). At the national level, he has facilitated policy dialogue and policy related research and at the regional and global level coordinated communication and knowledge management activities for a range of organizations. He is currently coordinating communication and knowledge management activities for the CGIAR Program on Water, land and Ecosystems. Email: [m.victor@cgiar.org](mailto:m.victor@cgiar.org)

*Juergen Hagmann* is an organizational development and change management consultant mainly in the field of agricultural development. His main work is the facilitation of learning processes, strategy development and change processes in organizations at different levels. Among many other clients, he has worked with almost all the CGIAR research centers in their change processes, planning and project development for 20 years. He is leading

[PICOTEAM](#), the institute for people, innovation and change in organizations and is based in Nairobi. Email: [jurgen.hagmann@picoteam.org](mailto:jurgen.hagmann@picoteam.org)

*Cristina Sette* is the Knowledge Sharing and Learning Specialist of the Institutional Learning and Change Initiative (ILAC) of CGIAR ([www.cgiar-ilac.org](http://www.cgiar-ilac.org)), where she works on monitoring for learning, and on new research frameworks. She has been involved in facilitation for over a decade, and prior to that, worked as an extensionist for livestock farming. Email: [c.sette@cgiar.org](mailto:c.sette@cgiar.org)

*Petr Kosina* is a training and knowledge management specialist working as a consultant for the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center ([www.cimmyt.org](http://www.cimmyt.org)) and other research and development organizations in the area of capacity development, information and knowledge management, and instructional design. Petr has 7 years of experience of meetings and participatory processes facilitation. His personal blog is: <http://clobrda.wordpress.com>  
Email: [p.kosina@cgiar.org](mailto:p.kosina@cgiar.org)

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<sup>1</sup> CGIAR is a global partnership that unites organizations engaged in research for a food secure future (<http://www.cgiar.org/who-we-are/>).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Jürgen Hagmann on November 6, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Carlos Sere on October 23, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> CGIAR strategic Research Framework [SRF](#), 2014, p.11, accessed 29 October 2014.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.communityatwork.com/>

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Nancy White on November 12, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cynefin> consulted online on 14 November 2014

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.liberatingstructures.com/> consulted online on 14 November 2014

<sup>9</sup> List of web conferencing apps on Wikipedia accessed 23 October 2014.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web\\_conferencing#Software\\_and\\_service\\_providers](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_conferencing#Software_and_service_providers)

<sup>10</sup> [Connectivism theory](#) (Siemens, G. & Downes, S., 2005) quoted in <http://teacherchallenge.edublogs.org/pln-challenge-1-what-the-heck-is-a-pln/>, accessed 29 October 2014

<sup>11</sup> <http://jarche.com/2014/03/personal-knowledge-mastery/>, accessed 20 November 2014

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cgiar.org/cgiar-consortium/consortium-office/> consulted on November 20 2014

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Nadia Manning on October 16, 2014.