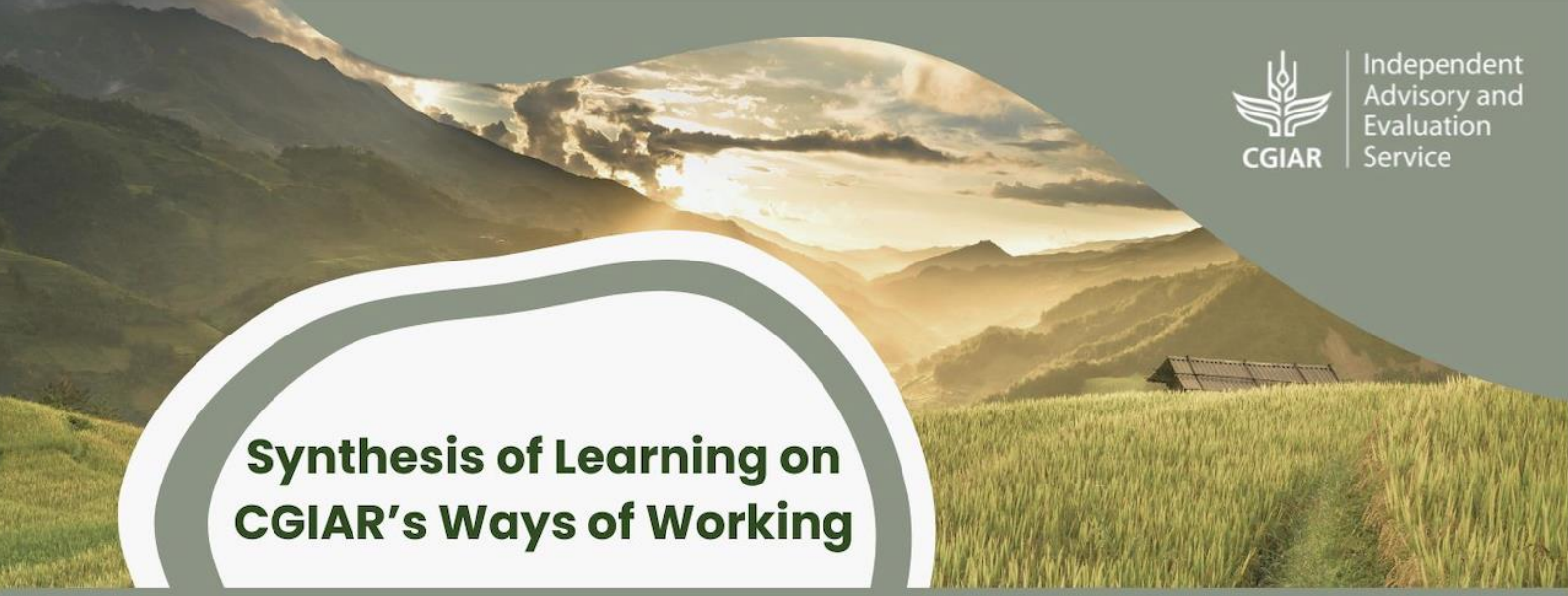


Synthesis of Learning on CGIAR's Ways of Working

November 2025

Background

The CGIAR 2030 Research and Innovation Strategy identifies Ways of Working (WoWs) to strengthen the delivery of research-based solutions for development outcomes (see Table 1). The Evaluation Function (EF) of the Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service (IAES) produced five summaries on the WoWs[1] areas to inform learning and decision-making among CGIAR governance and management bodies on operationalization of WoWs (see project ToR). This synthesis highlights key learning across the reports.

Approach

The summaries' methods rely primarily on a structured desk review and triangulation of independent evidence.[2] Sources include IAES EF evaluations, Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC) reviews, Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA) studies, center- and Integrated Partnership Board-led reviews, Internal Audit reports, and selected external literature. In addition, inception reports from the 2025–30 CGIAR Research and Innovation Portfolio were analyzed using the WoWs lens. The evidence was summarized by evaluators and subject matter experts drawn from the IAES expert roster.

Engagement approaches including five webinars were deliberate to ensure findings were effectively shared with relevant stakeholders and to collect additional insights. The webinars involved approximately 100 key stakeholders across CGIAR. The EF conducted a field visit to the Republic of Uganda to gather evidence on the WoWs in practice and to provide additional context. The Partnerships Study synthesized evidence leading to the 31 partnership related recommendations using the CGIAR 2024 Engagement Framework as a structured basis for analysis.

The present synthesis was prepared by the IAES EF and reviewed by the former Chair of the ISDC, Holger Meinke, and member of the EF Evaluation Reference Group, Marlene Roefs, following an initial review by authors of the five WoWs reports.

Table 1: List of CGIAR's WoWs

Report (R)	WoW topic
R1	Embracing a systems transformation approach, seeking multiple benefits across five Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)-linked Impact Areas.
	Generating scientific evidence on multiple transformation pathways.
R2	Targeting risk-management and resilience as critical qualities for food, land, and water systems.
R3	Harnessing innovative finance to leverage and deliver research through new investment and funding models.
R4	Making the digital revolution central to our way of working
R5	Positioning regions, countries, and landscapes as central dimensions of partnership, worldview, and impact.
	Leveraging ambitious partnerships for change in which CGIAR is strategically positioned.

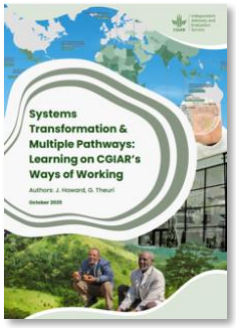
[1] Given the interconnections between WoWs topics, two reports covered more than one WoW.

[2] The approach of pooling evidence from multiple sources is aligned with CGIAR's institutional efforts to strengthen linkages between Monitoring, Evaluation, Impact Assessments, and Foresight (MELIA-F) functions across centers, programs, and other independent assurance provider levels.

Key Findings

CGIAR WoWs are interconnected, and progress or setbacks in one area can affect results in other areas. Below are the key findings from each report. More detailed findings are available in the respective publications.[3]

Systems Transformation & Generating Scientific Evidence on Multiple Pathways (R1)



CGIAR is shifting toward an integrated, locally responsive model of food systems transformation. To fully achieve this vision, CGIAR must adopt a transdisciplinary WoW that defines common principles, is realistic in scope and strengthens social science capacity, including: (1) stronger co-design and coordination with national and regional partners; (2) secure, long-term and predictable investment and embedded incentives for systems research; and (3) improved collaboration and stakeholder engagement.

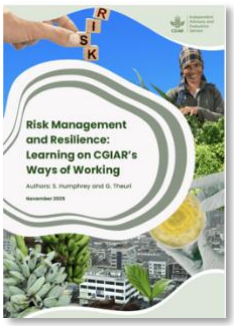
Over the last few decades, CGIAR evolved away from being a largely linear, technology-centric organization by adopting a more adaptive, systems-based model. Achieving the ambitious systems transformation objectives will require further cultural changes, greater clarity of underpinning concepts, consistent operationalization and more reliable funding.

CGIAR's Impact Areas, such as climate and nutrition integration, have advanced, but equity, biodiversity, water, and livelihoods continue to be inconsistently addressed. Initiatives such as SHiFT and Agroecology demonstrate how biophysical, social, and policy dimensions can be combined, yet sustained transdisciplinary capacity—particularly in social sciences and stakeholder engagement—remain a gap.

Scaling efforts spread innovations but rarely tackle structural systems change. Institutional and funding pressures risk reverting to short-term, output-driven approaches.

CGIAR is moving in the right direction. Lasting progress will depend on institutional alignment, sustained funding, and empowered partnerships that bridge scaling and systems change.

Risk Management and Resilience (R2)



CGIAR has developed a broad portfolio of tested solutions aimed at reducing production losses from climate- and health-related stressors and shocks. Uptake will depend on validation at scale beyond project or action-research contexts, requiring engagement with diverse actors.

Collaboration in design and delivery of the CGIAR 2022-24 Portfolio (structured around three Science Groups and 33 Initiatives) strengthened cohesion and sense of community among CGIAR scientists across centers, geographies and disciplines. However, knowledge of CGIAR's work on resilience remains fragmented in the absence of a framework for tracking delivery on this WoW.

CGIAR's 2025–30 Portfolio reflects a focus on core solutions related to health hazards (pandemics, zoonotic diseases, antimicrobial resistance) and climate adaptation but gives limited attention to externalities and of trade-offs. Resilience emerges as a common concern, yet its definition and the contribution of CGIAR-related impact pathways remain insufficiently explored. Therefore, the report suggests building communities of practice, reinforcing foresight linkages, and developing metrics.

Box 1. Foresight and trade-off analysis efforts in CGIAR (R 1&2)

CGIAR has established a clear case for use of foresight and trade-off analysis to inform its strategy and interventions and build a knowledge base on megatrends and the future of food systems. However, the summaries found limited evidence of these foresight tools being systematically used to inform planning.

Tools such as IMPACT, FARRMS, and scenario analysis are increasingly used to guide decision-making, yet they require stronger integration into program design, broader accessibility, and continued technical reinforcement. In this context, there is a need to reinforce linkages between foresight studies and planning for interventions and innovations, including through engagement with key actors, such as country partners and potential scaling partners.

[3] Publications are available at EF Evaluative Learning Hub.

Innovative Finance (R3)

CGIAR is well positioned to contribute scientific and innovation expertise to addressing food system challenges, including in non-traditional areas of collaboration. A comprehensive inventory of CGIAR's capacities, instruments, and internal reporting mechanisms for Innovative Finance (IF) is an essential starting point.

There is persistent ambiguity between IF and Resource Mobilization (RM), coupled with a prevailing but unproven assumption that more work in IF will lead to increased resources. Furthermore, there is no documented evidence of sufficient investment in human resources or enabling policies to meet WoW IF ambitions.

Blended finance, green bonds, and crowdfunding show promise in enhancing financial access for smallholders, but their effectiveness relies heavily on local governance structures and the ability to address the unique needs of smallholders.

> *"Any innovative finance effort or framework at CGIAR should maintain a certain level of flexibility to adapt to specific interests. If we try to fit everything into a single plan, we risk missing many opportunities."*
>
> ***Enrica Maria Porcari (IPB Board Member)***

Private sector engagement is fundamental, yet Intellectual Property concerns may deter some partners if collaboration limits monetization opportunities.

Achieving impact at scale through IF requires engagement with meso- and macro institutions involved in IF. Supporting IF to International Financial Institutions (IFIs), climate finance mechanisms, blended funds, and other derisking instruments primarily entails providing technical assistance, services and expertise. This creates opportunities to influence fund allocations and to embed CGIAR's theories of change, research evidence, and tools into program design and implementation.

Digital Revolution (R4)

There is momentum within CGIAR to adopt technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), machine learning, and digital platforms to improve coordination and accelerate research outcomes. Structural barriers, such as siloed operations and weak inter-module coordination remain, which limit the full potential of these digital systems.

Tools such as GARDIAN, the Breeding Portal, and Global Market Intelligence Platform (GloMIP) streamlined workflows and improve knowledge sharing. Webinars, virtual meetings, and communities of practice strengthened cross-center collaboration. Early successes with emerging technologies such as AI, machine learning, and earth observation data are promising (e.g., machine learning-based fertilizer recommendations boosted wheat yields by 25% in Ethiopia).[4] However, siloed operations and weak inter-program coordination continue to constrain impact.

While CGIAR is building ties with private companies through advisory groups, platforms, and collaborations (e.g., Inspire Challenge, Excellence in Breeding), co-development of digital solutions with industry remains uneven and largely aspirational.

The Digital Transformation Accelerator (2025–30) convenes major tech firms, government agencies, AgTechs, NGOs, and funders, to drive digital innovation in agriculture. Continued investment is needed in data quality, curation, and system-wide capacity to realize the potential of Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, and Reusable (FAIR) principles and to enable advanced analytics, including AI.

Digital access and use by end-users, particularly smallholder farmers, remain a critical gap. While CGIAR emphasizes co-design and inclusion, barriers such as infrastructure, digital literacy, and gender gaps in device ownership persist. Overall, gender considerations remain under-addressed. More intentional, gender-responsive design is needed to ensure equitable benefits.

[4]Source: CGIAR. (2024, June). Smarter fertilizer: AI-powered recommendations boost wheat yields in Ethiopia.

Partnerships (R5)

The 2022 Engagement Framework laid the foundation for strengthening partnerships across CGIAR. Evaluative evidence from 2021-24 shows progress in applying the Framework principles[5] and improving coordination at national and regional levels. However, efforts remain fragmented, and institutional arrangements still do not match the ambitions articulated as part of the CGIAR reform process.

Findings highlighted a gap between the ambition of CGIAR's integrated reform agenda and the institutional mechanisms in place. Institutional gaps limited the effectiveness of CGIAR's coordination and partnership mechanisms at country and regional levels. Financial and human resource constraints influenced the partnership quality and created uncertainty around research continuity and partner engagement.

Collaboration is mostly driven by established relationships instead of an integrated, system-wide approach. Strong engagement with research institutions and universities contrasts with limited involvement with governments and international organizations. Partnerships with the private sector remain inconsistent and largely unstructured.

Targeted training programs and collaborative learning platforms built relevant technical skills, supported national policy engagement, and reinforced institutional relationships. However, these efforts lacked structured follow-up, long-term support, and stable funding.

Research-driven engagements positioned CGIAR as a credible policy actor but without a unified advocacy strategy. CGIAR's influence remains fragmented and uneven across regions and themes.

Strategic Implications

The combined findings from the five reports highlight opportunities for strengthening CGIAR's approaches to put its Strategy into practice. These span the strategic, programmatic, and operational levels of the system, illustrating the interconnected dynamics of organizational learning and change.

Box 2. Key users and data sources of WoWs' learning

- System Council and its committees and advisory bodies.
- Integrated Partnership Board and associated working groups and committees working on IF and RM.
- CGIAR-wide executive and scientific leadership, and center Directors General.
- Assurance providers in CGIAR, such as Internal Audit.
- Scientists and researchers at all levels
- MELIA-F practitioners across CGIAR.

Strategic Level: Funding

The increasingly challenging funding landscape demands that CGIAR explore innovative financing mechanisms to fulfill its mission. Sustained funding and appropriate incentives are critical to strengthening systems work, building and maintaining transdisciplinary partnerships, and supporting innovation at scale.

> *"Most multilaterals have expertise in innovative finance. Some of these multilaterals are already funding CGIAR. I think it would be more effective to build on their work, leverage their expertise, and create a strong new portfolio for CGIAR".*
>
> ***Ruben Echeverria, System Council Member, CGIAR.***

CGIAR's comparative advantage in IF lies in its science and innovation capacity. To enhance its contribution, CGIAR should prioritize research that; advances IF, focuses on a limited number of IF efforts, pilots new technical assistance approaches, and collaborates strategically with organizations more directly engaged in IF.

Programming and Portfolio Level: Coherence and Consistency

Greater coherence is needed across CGIAR programs, including bilaterally funded projects, and alignment with national and regional priorities, while maintaining complementarity with funder priorities. CGIAR should also strengthen linkages between foresight and planning processes to support the design of forward-looking and context-appropriate interventions.

[5] The Engagement Framework sets out a consistent, system-wide approach to partnerships and advocacy, anchored in the seven principles: complementarity, shared ownership, results focus, transparency, integrity, calculated risk, and learning culture.

Embedding co-design processes with country and regional stakeholders will ensure innovations respond to local opportunities and constraints. Beyond NARS, where partnerships are robust, CGIAR should create clearer incentives and frameworks for private sector engagement and foster interdisciplinary collaboration at scale.

An emerging priority is the need to build a shared understanding of systems approaches to risk and resilience, clarify how CGIAR contributes, and develops appropriate metrics to measure systems change.

> *"Just as when we moved from the MDGs to the SDGs, the question now is what will shape the global agenda beyond 2030. CGIAR can help define this vision through science-based evidence and innovation."*
>
> ***Anna Okello, Director Food Frontiers and Security Science Program.***

CGIAR should prioritize inclusive and gender responsive design and the access for end users', building on its co-design approach to ensure tools (particularly digital) address rural infrastructure, affordability, and literacy gaps, with a sharper focus on women and marginalized groups.

To maximize the value of digital investments, CGIAR needs to move from endorsement to full implementation of FAIR principles, supported by sustained investment in data curation and system-wide capacity.

Operational Level: Enabling Environment

To embed partnerships as a core element of the CGIAR's operating model, critical enablers include: (1) Senior-level accountability for partnership strategy and delivery; (2) Formalized System Office partnership unit to drive coherence, learning, and institutional memory; and (3) Dedicated resources for relationship-building, co-creation, and sustained engagement.

Evidence-based reporting on IF within CGIAR system remains inconsistent. Expanding engagement in IF will necessitate the development of robust policies, legal frameworks, enhanced human resource capacities, and mechanisms for timely responses.

Closing Evidence Gaps for System Change

CGIAR has identified strategic WoWs to guide system change. Achieving the WoWs' objectives requires addressing existing methodological and capacity gaps.

Methodological gaps: Lack of standardized metrics, dashboards, and system-wide evaluative work limits CGIAR's ability to measure change in WoWs and to measure system wide learning

CGIAR should develop metrics to monitor its efforts on resilience, use dashboards to track engagement in Climate Finance and IF, and map evidence-based work in these areas. It should also review technical support provided to finance partners.

Strengthening FAIR data practices and improving standardized, gender-sensitive surveys will help measure smallholder benefits. Tools such as the Multidimensional Digital Inclusiveness Index should be scaled to reach underserved communities.

Capacity gaps: Skills, human resource planning, and transdisciplinary expertise remain limiting factors. CGIAR should review HR needs, staff profiles, and staffing goals to align with WoW ambitions.

While promising interdisciplinary initiatives exist, social science and stakeholder engagement capacity is still insufficient.

Currently, there is no documented evidence of sufficient investment in human resources for IF within CGIAR system to meet WoWs ambitions.

Financial and human resource constraints also affect partnership quality and stability. The scale and human resources required to significantly expand climate-related finance programs and projects should be carefully considered.

Learn more, visit the Learning on CGIAR's Ways of Working resource page

CGIAR Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service

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