

Changing demands in social research in international agricultural research: The experience at ICARDA

Aden Aw-Hassan and Malika A. Martini

Abstract

International agricultural research (IAR) faces as much challenge today as it did some four decades ago when such work began. Increased food production was the main goal of IAR, given the threat of mass-starvation due to food shortages and growing populations in developing countries. The remarkable increase in food production, both in developing and developed countries, has by and large diminished this threat. However, recent developments, such as increased global trade, global climate change, concerns over food safety, degradation of the environment and natural resources, and persistent poverty, pose new challenges for IAR. The demand for social science research has been changing as a result of the increasing need to understand more complex issues as IAR has shifted its focus from production to utilization and impact of agricultural research outputs.

This paper presents an example of the changes in social science research at the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) in the last 22 years. The paper presents analysis of trends and status of social science research at ICARDA. It assesses research trends since the early 1980s in the fields of agricultural economics, anthropology, geography, sociology, rural development, nutrition and related fields, and analyzes the particular themes dealt with by scientists at the Center, and the implications on research outputs. There is increasing demand for social science research. This demand is driven by the need to understand the complex systems that affect poverty and natural resources management. The demand, in terms of quality and diversity of social science at the Center, is increasing. For example, scientists are adopting a participatory approach to research, and they need informative assessments of their work to alleviate poverty and improve nutrition. Everything they do must be assessed in terms of impact. This is all part of an evolved awareness within the agricultural research community that has had an important effect on the type and quality of research conducted. Clear prioritization of social science research is critical at this time of increasing demand.