Rethinking the Architecture of Impact

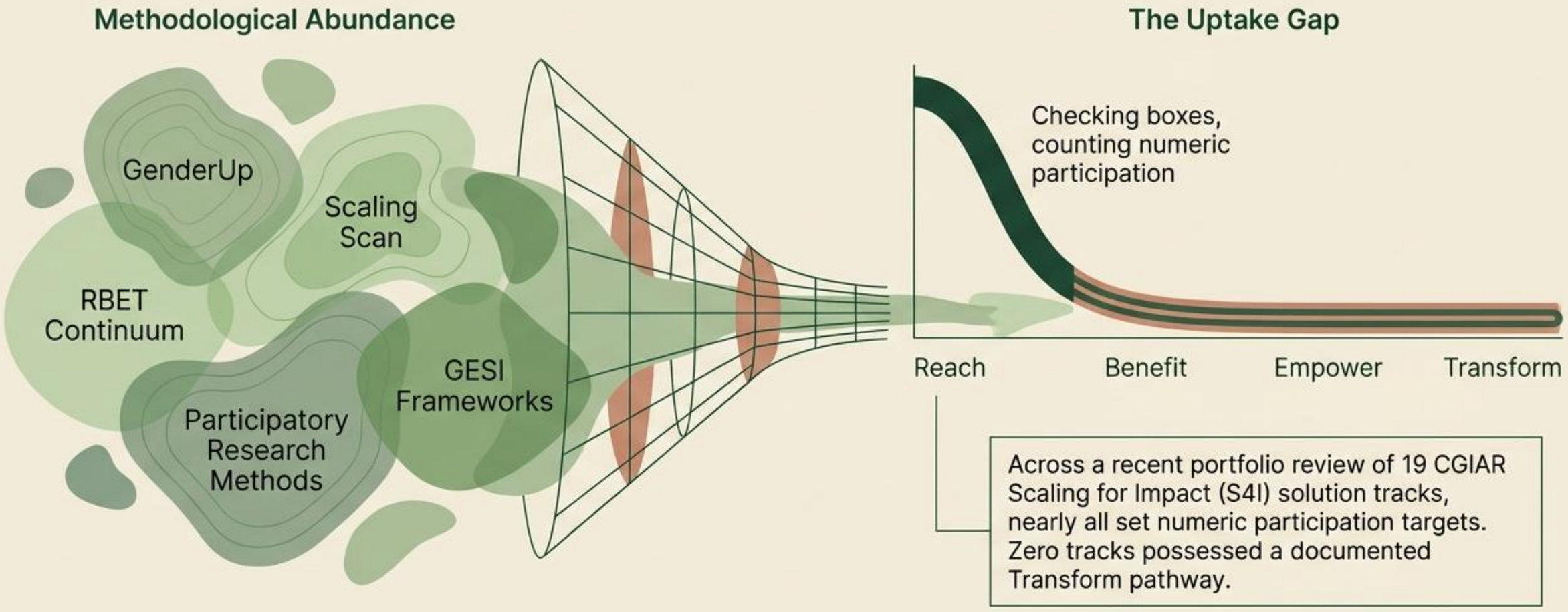
Moving from Tool Supply to Institutional Accountability in Global Food Systems

Erin McGuire, PhD
Director of Responsible Innovations & Executive Director of International Agricultural Development, UC Davis

McGuire et al. (2024), Equity principles; McGuire, Ewell et al. (2025), Breaking biases

The Paradox of Methodological Abundance

Developing a tool does not establish institutional demand. We continually invest in the supply of methodologies, but they are frequently reduced to unapplied template references.



Responsible Innovations (2026), GESI Inventory, §§5.1–5.4; McGuire, Ewell et al. (2025), Breaking biases

The Political Economy of Scaling

Diagnostic Comparison Matrix

Barrier	Surface Reality	Deep Institutional Question
Leadership	Desire for scalable solutions.	Do decision-makers understand why responsible scaling improves their ability to deliver outcomes, and therefore deserves investment?
Incentives	Rewarding sheer volume and reach.	What happens when teams receive recognition for reaching more people, while investigating transformation takes longer?
Power	Pre-determined institutional scaling priorities.	Who controls budgets and eligibility rules? Who gains from keeping those arrangements intact?
Learning	Producing tools and delivering training.	Do organizations actually support repeated application, facilitation, and cross-track exchange?
Accountability	Checking the GESI integration box.	Who must respond when analysis reveals exclusion or harm?

McGuire et al. (2024), Equity principles; McGuire, Ewell et al. (2025), Breaking biases

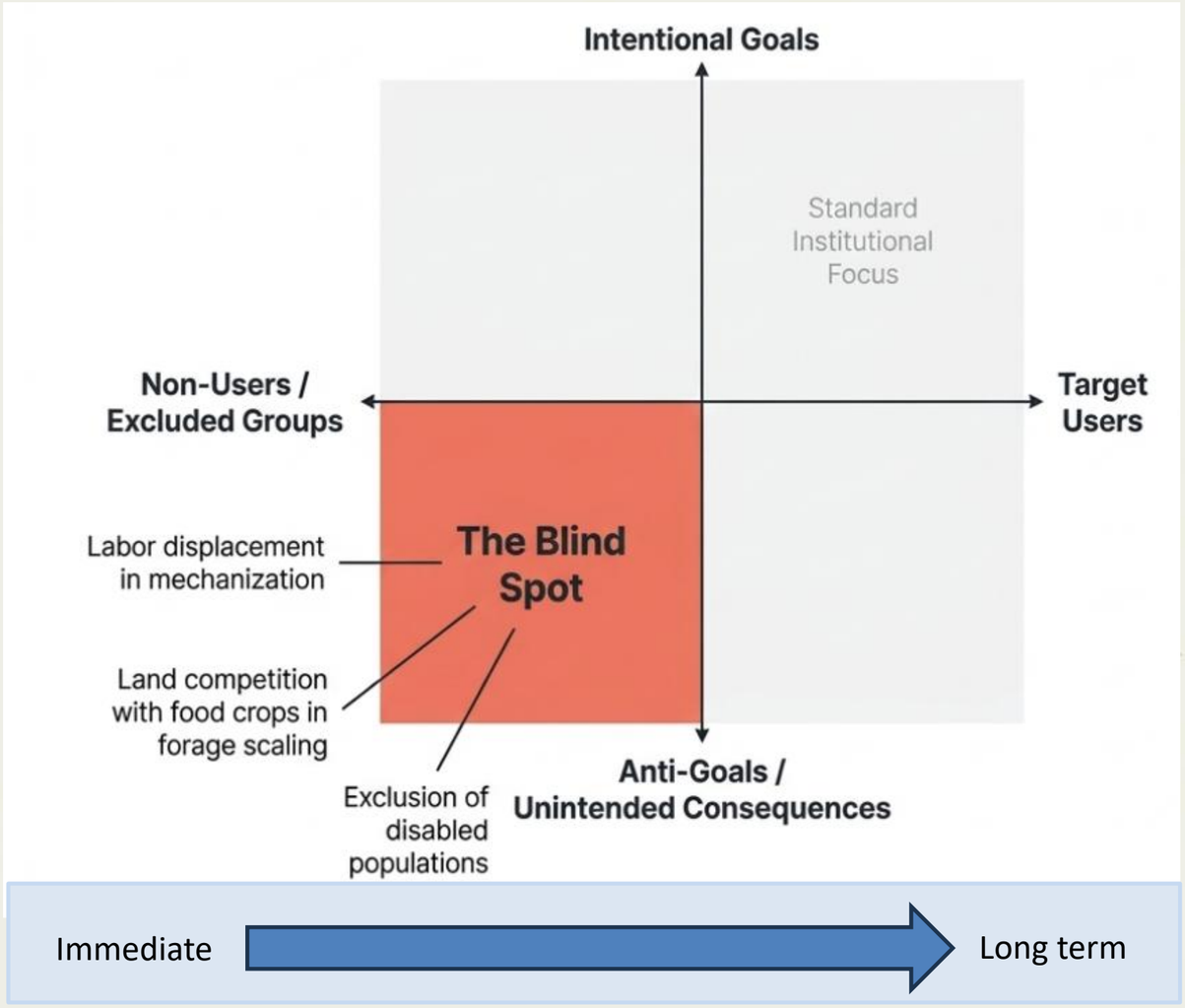
Upgrading the Architecture: Nominal vs. Responsible

Current State (Nominal Inclusion)	Future State (Responsible Architecture)
Metrics: Unverified numeric participation targets for women and youth.	**Metrics:** Indicators of actual benefit, ownership, and decision-making power.
Resourcing: GESI components treated as unbudgeted, sidelined checkboxes.	**Resourcing:** Power mapping and GESI analysis embedded directly into running OPEX costs.
Reporting: Actor tables (e.g., PRMS) that lack sex and age disaggregation.	**Reporting:** Anticipatory risk registers for social harms reviewed during active implementation.
Access: Eligibility tied to land ownership and traditional collateral.	**Access:** Eligibility based on non-land-collateral finance and inclusive delivery models.

Responsible Innovations (2026), GESI Inventory, §§5.3–5.4; McGuire et al. (2026), GESI-Responsive Scaling Framework

Anticipating and Mitigating Unintended Consequences

The Mandate: We must institutionalize dedicated time to pause and prevent systemic harm. A single day of risk reflection can prevent decades of structural damage.



Beyond the User Divide

We need comprehensive systems evaluation and structural risk assessments that look beyond the basic “user vs. non-user” binary.

Defining Anti-Goals

How does one group lose when another wins? We must map the failures—such as AI digital finance agent bias, or incumbent capture of mechanization subsidies—before they scale.

McGuire et al. (2024), Equity principles; McGuire et al. (2024), GenderUp

Upgrading the Architecture: Avoiding Unintended Consequences

Nominal vs. Responsible Scaling

Nominal	Responsible
Focuses on Reach	Focuses on Benefit, Empower, Transform
Assumes universal benefit	Anticipates harm
Relies on unchecked targets	Relies on enforceable metrics
Ignores unintended consequences	

The Three Gates of Responsible Scaling



Gate 1: Empirical Verification
Proof of benefit, not just enrollment. (Women benefit, not just enroll).

Gate 2: Co-Design & Power Mapping
Clarifying who controls the devices, data, and income. Inclusive design with marginalized users as data owners.

Gate 3: Enforceable Governance
A named accountable party for when things go wrong, farmer-led data governance, and active mechanisms to flag and fix harm.

Developing and promoting a tool does not establish institutional demand for it.

Are we organizing research and scaling around the outcomes we want, or simply around the activities our institutions already know how to fund and count?”

McGuire et al. (2024), Equity principles & GenderUp; McGuire, Ewell et al. (2025), Breaking biases