FROM: The Secretariat

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Role of Center Boards of Trustees
within the CGIAR System

Introduction

1. The Boards of Trustees of the international centers and programs supported by the CGIAR are a cornerstone in the operation of the international agricultural research effort. It is the Boards which have the final, legal responsibility for ensuring the scientific quality and relevance, managerial efficiency and financial integrity of the individual centers. Many of the unique strengths of the CGIAR enterprise — the autonomy and independence of its constituent parts, the informality and the relatively non-bureaucratic, decentralized structure — are possible largely because of the confidence and trust shown by the members of the Consultative Group in the Boards of Trustees.

2. The current problem of allocating scarce funds in 1980 has underlined a basic dilemma in the nature of the responsibilities of Center Boards of Trustees as presently constituted.

3. The first responsibility of a Board of Trustees is, and must be, to its own center, for the Board must ensure the quality, effectiveness and soundness of that institution. Yet the center forms part of a larger enterprise, and what is best for an individual center may not always be best for the system as a whole. What is the responsibility of a Board to this greater entity?

4. For example, given its responsibility for the continued viability and effectiveness of its center, a Board of Trustees properly seeks to ensure that it will be financially secure. While a Board may appreciate the constraints affecting the system as a whole, and the need to carefully scrutinize each major item in its center's program and budget request, it may also feel that it is in competition for scarce funds with other centers and must therefore put forward its strongest case, both in its budget request and in its periodic contacts with the donor community. Similarly, in scientific management, if duplication or conflict arises where two or more centers are working on the same commodity or in the same country, a Board may give less weight to the need for complementarity and efficiency within the system than to what it perceives to be the legitimate and proper role of its own center.

Distribution:

CG Members
Center Board Chairmen
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5. The CGIAR was created for the explicit purpose of building a set of complementary activities filling the major gaps in agricultural research. The sponsors of the enterprise -- the members of the Consultative Group -- expect the international centers and programs to share a sense of common responsibility.

6. Moreover, as the CG system has grown, the members of the Group have become more actively concerned with setting the future balance and direction of the CGIAR research effort. Recent examples include the emphasis on research which will benefit resource-poor farmers, the decision to limit the growth of established centers and the desire to review and modify the research priorities within the network.

Responsibility

7. Responsibility for implementing the decisions of the Group rests initially with a center's Board of Trustees, which sets the policy for that center. How thoroughly this responsibility is exercised depends on the degree to which a center Board of Trustees feels responsible, and accountable, to the Consultative Group as a whole. There are about 150 Board members. As yet, there appears to be no clear consensus among them as to what obligation they may feel they have to carry out the decisions of the Group. Where, in fact, does final authority rest?

8. The Boards of Trustees themselves are beginning to grapple with this question. A paper on the "Responsibilities of Trustees for International Agricultural Research Centers" has been prepared for discussion at a meeting of Center Board Chairmen during Centers Week. This year's Chairman of the Chairmen will be reporting to the CG meeting on the outcome of these discussions. Essentially, the paper outlines the duties and functions of Boards and their members, selection procedures and criteria for new members, committees, relationship with the Director General, and other matters important in the management of a center.

9. One paragraph of the paper describes the appropriate relationship of the centers to the Consultative Group. It suggests there is a "delicate balance of power and influence between the CG, TAC and the centers" the maintenance of which is essential to the continued success of the system. It argues that the Boards must be more helpful to the Group and TAC than in the past, both in the coordination among centers within the system and in external relations with donors.

10. In the future, competition for funds will be an inevitable feature of the CGIAR. As the network grows the need for effective collaboration among activities will become greater. Under these circumstances, the questions of resource allocation, research priorities and balance and the resolution of problems on a system-wide basis will become increasingly important. At the center of these questions is the role of the Boards of Trustees in the future, and the relationship of the individual units within the CGIAR to the network as a whole.
Accountability

11. The responsibilities of a Board of Trustees may be divided into four. These relate to (i) the center which it governs, (ii) the other centers which comprise the CGIAR network, (iii) the developing countries which benefit from the center's work, and (iv) the Consultative Group which sets policies and provides funds for the system as a whole.

12. As part of its first responsibility a Board is concerned with the quality and relevance of the center's research programs. Judging by the findings of TAC's Quinquennial Reviews to date, this function is being carried out satisfactorily. A second part of this responsibility is to oversee the management and financial affairs of the center. Boards have varied as to the importance and attention they have given to this function. However, there is a growing awareness of the need to ensure the same standards of excellence as in the scientific programs.

13. The second responsibility -- toward making the CGIAR system a genuinely collaborative effort -- is being given greater attention by several centers and their Boards. Collaborative agreements among several centers have been signed, and cooperation in both scientific and administrative matters is increasing. The role of TAC is also becoming more important in this area, such as in the case of upland rice research. While collaboration may still not be wholly satisfactory in every instance, most centers are making genuine efforts to collaborate rather than compete.

14. The third responsibility -- to the developing countries and their peoples -- is common to all participants in this effort, and it is on how this responsibility is discharged that the centers and Consultative Group will eventually be judged. The growth of center off-campus programs over the past three years demonstrates that centers and their Boards recognize this responsibility and are committed to collaboration with the developing countries.

15. If the centers and their Boards execute these first three responsibilities properly, they are, in fact helping to fulfill their fourth responsibility -- to the Consultative Group. The members of the Group share these same objectives: to create a collaborative network of high-quality research institutions carrying out research of direct relevance and value to developing countries. For the Group, a basic issue respecting future governance and management is the degree to which it should actively guide the centers in the carrying out these responsibilities.

16. The principal management question is whether there should be a more direct relationship between the Boards and the Group.

17. The independence and autonomy of the centers has always been one of the guiding principles of the Consultative Group. The international centers have been largely free from the political pressures which surround most publicly-sponsored activities. Because of the long-term nature of research they have also needed to be less susceptible to rapid shifts in thinking and emphasis sometimes characteristic of the international aid community. At the same time, each center must be aware of, and responsive to, the genuine concerns and interests of its sponsors and its beneficiaries. Independence should not be synonymous with isolation or insulation. If the centers are to be effective, and if the Group is to act wisely and responsibly, there may need to be a greater integration of effort. The Group may need to be more aware of the objectives and
concerns of the centers and their Boards, while Boards of Trustees may need to understand and appreciate better the interests and expectations of the members of the Group. More explicit cooperation may be needed if the proper balance between independence and accountability is to be struck.

18. There are several steps which could be taken within the existing CGIAR structure to improve understanding and cooperation between Boards of Trustees and the Group, and enhance the sense of participation in one another's affairs. An essential feature of this process would be improvements in the manner in which Board members are selected and prepared for service on the Board.

19. Presently, each international center is governed by an independent Board of Trustees. Apart from ex officio members, such as host country representatives and the Director General, members serve in their individual capacities. Most Boards are self-perpetuating, i.e. a Board itself is responsible for selecting new members as vacancies occur.

20. Since the creation of the CGIAR in 1971, the constitution of every new center supported by the Group (except WARDA) provides for certain members of the Board to be selected by the CGIAR. Typically three places are reserved for CGIAR-designated members, although in newer centers the number tends to be greater. The four oldest centers which pre-date the CGIAR have no CG-designated members.

21. While certain members of Boards serve as CG designated members, they serve in their individual capacity. They receive no instructions or guidance from the Group and are under no obligation to report to it.

22. If improved understanding and cooperation between the Group and the Boards of Trustees is to be sought, a number of actions are possible. First, the Group could have the responsibility and the right to place on each Board a certain number of trustees as recommended by the CGIAR Review Committee in 1976. While several of the four original centers have named to their Boards officials of donors and have invited suggestions from CG members when considering candidates to fill vacancies, none has amended its charter or Articles to provide for CG Board members. Since in their relationship to the CGIAR the older centers are no different from the newer ones, it is logical and appropriate that whatever arrangements are made for the CG to fill certain vacancies on Boards should be common to all.

23. Second, the function of CG Board members could have more meaning and purpose. Currently, they have no responsibility toward the Consultative Group, formal or informal. They neither receive guidance from the Group nor report to the Group. They may be no more familiar with the Consultative Group actions or processes than any other Board member. To date, their designation has been largely symbolic. Only in their initial selection do they differ from other Board members.

24. The participation of CG Board members could be made more purposeful and could contribute to better mutual understanding if they understood, and could present, the views and interests of the Group to the Boards. This would require greater participation by these Board members in the activities of the Group. To this end they could be specifically briefed on the Group's policies, interests and concerns and they could routinely attend CGIAR meetings.
In this way, they would be better placed to present (but not necessarily represent) to the Boards the Group's concerns on important issues, and similarly express the views of the Boards at CG meetings when appropriate.

25. This action could be taken without altering the current practice that, once selected, CG Board members serve independently and in their individual capacities. A different issue -- which is not addressed here -- is whether these members should receive more explicit guidance from the Group on issues peculiar to the center on whose Board they serve.

26. Third, the continued vitality and proper functioning of Boards depends in large part on the quality of members who serve. The members of the CGIAR represent a broad spectrum of governments, foundations and international organizations with contacts throughout the world's scientific management and aid communities. The pool of highly qualified candidates for Board membership has not yet been adequately tapped. The present processes for identifying and assessing possible candidates could be improved. A more systematic and comprehensive process of seeking and evaluating candidates should be developed. Indeed, the sense of mutual responsibility between the Group and the centers might be enhanced if donors were more actively involved in the selection process.

27. While the role of the Boards of Trustees and the mutual responsibility and accountability of the constituent parts of the Consultative Group are not pressing issues at this time, they are bound to become more important as the system develops and expands. The principles and mechanisms which have guided it in the past will need to be reviewed to ensure that they are still adequate to deal with a larger and more complex institution. The structure of the governance and management of the CGIAR and the network it supports ought to be reviewed systematically.

28. The 1979 Integrative Report suggests that the Group undertake the second review of the function of the system in 1981. These questions could be specifically addressed in the course of the review.

29. The views of the members of the Group on the issues raised above would be a useful beginning to the process of reviewing the management of the Group. The Group may also wish to discuss whether any of the possible actions suggested merit further consideration and might be initiated prior to a full-scale review (which would not be completed until the end of 1981 at the earliest). If desired, the Secretariat could prepare specific proposals regarding the selection, appointment and orientation of CG Board members. These proposals could be considered at the next meeting of the Consultative Group.