IFPRI Fourth EPMR 2004/05
Overview
SC and CGIAR Secretariat Commentary
Center Response
Panel Report: Summary and Recommendations

November 2005
SC Commentary on the 4th IFPRI EPMR Report

The Report of the Fourth External Programme and Management Review (EPMR) of IFPRI was discussed at SC 3 following a presentation of the main findings and recommendations of the Report by the Panel Chair, Bruce Gardner, and after brief responses from the Centre Board of Trustees member Roberto Vazquez Platero and Director General Joachim von Braun. The SC wishes to express its appreciation to the Panel for conducting a comprehensive assessment of the Centre’s past performance and presenting a sound strategic analysis and forward-looking perspective on the Centre. The SC also appreciates the facilitating role played by the Centre in the review process.

Introduction

SC is pleased to note the overall positive performance of the Centre during the period under review. This is all the more impressive given the rapid increase in budget (from $20 million in 1998 to $34 million in 2004), with an increasing share of restricted project funding, an expansion in the research and outreach portfolio with the incorporation of the ISNAR programme and initiation of the co-led Challenge Programme on Biofortification, and the major changes in the programmatic structure, including development of a new IFPRI Division covering development strategy and governance (DSGD). The Report provides a convincing case that IFPRI has indeed “moved with impressive agility” in aligning its organization with the many changes in the external and internal environments over the last seven years.

Based on a very comprehensive assessment of the Centre’s management and programme activities over the last seven years, the Panel concludes that IFPRI has a number of notable accomplishments, among them:

- generating outputs and services of high relevance to developing countries;
- substantially increasing its publications in refereed journals;
- successfully integrating its research, capacity strengthening and outreach;
- showing exemplary leadership in the Biofortification CP and CAPRi SWP and other work with Centres;
- providing global leadership in impact assessment methodology for policy research;
- maintaining a high reputation among peers and partners; and,
- smoothly managing the absorption of ISNAR.

The SC endorses this assessment. It congratulates the Centre on its stellar performance and believes IFPRI is well positioned to meet the challenges ahead. It is particularly pleased to note from the Panel Chair’s interviews with IFPRI peers that the Centre is considered by many to be the premier institute on food and agricultural policy research.

The Panel made 10 recommendations and a number of suggestions throughout the Report. These are meant primarily for improvement and to help further strengthen the Centre for the future. Indeed, the SC notes that much of the report’s narrative is rich in discussion of highly relevant yet complex issues for which no right or wrong course is identified, e.g., whether IFPRI should maintain trade modelling capacity, whether IFPRI should broaden the mission to areas outside of agriculture and food security narrowly defined, and various
options for attracting and maintaining outstanding individuals in food policy or agricultural development research. The SC 3 noted that while the Panel did not address these issues in a formal sense of a recommendation, they are issues for future discussion and decision for the System as a whole and for IFPRI. The SC accepts that it probably is premature, given the information available and discussion to-date, to offer any firm conclusions or recommendations. The Centre highlighted the important value of these discussion pieces within the report in terms of provoking debate within the Centre. The SC looks forward to following the progress of that debate.

The SC endorses all of the 10 specific recommendations made by the Panel. The Centre endorsed all but one (four-part) recommendation related to IFPRI governance.

**Vision, Mission and Strategy**

IFPRI’s mission continues to fit centrally into the CGIAR goal of achieving sustainable food security and reducing poverty in developing countries, as confirmed in the report. The current IFPRI Strategy, adopted in 2003, identifies a broad strategy under 14 research themes. The Panel noted some potential ambiguity or lack of clarity in the mission statement, specifically with respect to a broad versus a narrow definition of ‘food security’. Broadly defined, this can mean undertaking work in almost any area that raises the income of the poor. The SC agrees with the Panel that IFPRI should go beyond agriculture and food security narrowly defined but cautions the Centre about moving too far a field.

How the Centre defines its agenda is critically important. The SC agrees with the Panel that IFPRI must pay greater attention to matters of prioritization and of operational tactics for carrying out its ambitious agenda for maximum effectiveness. The SC, therefore, agrees with the recommendation for enhancing the transparency of the priority setting process. Given the heavy demand for IFPRI services, it is essential that the Centre identifies a clearer mechanism for prioritising its projects.

**Research, Capacity Strengthening, Communications and Director General Office**

The Panel made few specific programmatic-related recommendations for each of the research divisions themselves, although the discussion within each of the Divisional sections is replete with penetrating analyses and suggestions. The absence of firm conclusions and/or recommendations appears, to some extent, to be due to the lack of sufficiently in-depth centre commissioned external reviews (CCERs) on which the Panel could draw for its own assessment. This point—the need for having detailed reviews of each of IFPRI’s research divisions for the Panel to draw on—is mentioned by the Panel Chair in his cover letter and was highlighted in discussions at SC 3. It is not surprising, therefore, that four of the ten Panel recommendations relate to the need for conducting external evaluations of the Centre’s research programmes. In particular, the Panel believes that the newest programmes of IFPRI, DSG and ISNAR Divisions, should have CCERs conducted within the next two years. The Centre agrees.

The SC strongly endorses recommendation 9 that the Centre institute rolling CCERs with the objective of each Division undergoing a review once every 5 years. The Centre has agreed to
this recommendation though it indicated that joint (Divisional) CCERs may be more appropriate since much of IFPRI’s research is integrated across Divisions. This is a debatable point. Experience has shown that single programme or division CCERs tend to have greater depth and the SC notes the sole CCER conducted by IFPRI which covered all five Divisions had insufficient depth and coverage within Divisions, although the Panel noted it was useful nevertheless. Whatever the case, the SC firmly believes that a complete set of in-depth CCERs are needed for the EPMR teams so that precious time is not spent by the panels having to absorb and comprehend huge quantities of research and research related activities by the Centre.

The SC is pleased to note that the IFPRI’s Programme Advisory Committee of ISNAR has provided adequate oversight of the emerging programme and that staff recruitment is proceeding apace. The SC is concerned, however, about the Panel’s conclusion that a wide ranging, ambitious and speculative programme was being launched and was moving into areas for which it did not appear to have a comparative advantage. This warning must be taken seriously. Although the Centre has agreed to conduct a CCER within the next two years, the SC advises IFPRI to closely monitor key activities prior to that review, including the finalization of the strategy development plan and external ex-ante assessments of new project proposals.

The Panel noted on-going concerns (expressed by stakeholders both outside and within the CGIAR) about the System’s comparative advantage in setting up the Global Open Agricultural and Food University. More specifically, it questioned IFPRI’s comparative advantage in managing this initiative. The Panel argued that others were able to provide such services and the involvement of the Centres runs the risk of crowding them out. The SC concurs with the Panel’s assessment and, like the Panel, urges IFPRI to carefully consider its role and specific contributions to this initiative.

The SC agrees with the view expressed by the Panel, largely endorsed by the Centre, that IFPRI staff should strive to increase the number of publications in the leading (top 100) journals related most closely to the Centre’s business (development, nutrition, agricultural economics, policy, etc.). This is essentially the foundation for IFPRI’s credibility and its influence amongst key peers, clients and other stakeholders. Publications alone, however, are not enough. IFPRI must continue to keep a focus on other major outputs, such as policy analysis and policy recommendations, capacity strengthening and generation of databases that help move it towards its goals of sustainable poverty alleviation.

**Governance and Management**

With respect to the four-part recommendation made about governance, the Centre agreed with the spirit of the recommendation and the good practice found therein, but did not agree with several of the Panel’s assessments of the performance of IFPRI’s Board. Further discussion on this topic at SC 3 revealed that at least in one instance, the Panel may not have had relevant or timely information, e.g., the annual structured evaluation process for the DG. Nevertheless, the SC is pleased to note the Centre has generally welcomed these recommendations in the spirit of constructive advice and improvement and will respond accordingly.
There is some concern about the lack of adequate financial expertise on the Board, notwithstanding the fact that most BoT members have had some experience with accounting and budgets. The SC endorses the Panel’s call for greater expertise, i.e., stronger financial background, to lead to more proactive financial oversight by the Board.

**Issues and Challenges for the Future**

The time research staff is spending on indirect activities including search committees, task forces, publication reviews, strategic planning, fund-raising, and so forth, appears to be increasing over time. Indeed, the results of the staff survey support the Panel’s view that ‘time famine’—high time pressure felt by staff—appears to be the single most important constraint facing the Centre today. It seems to be a recurring problem of this centre, as it was a problem that surfaced during the last EPMR too. The SC is pleased to note that the Centre concurs with the recommendation to look carefully at this problem in a variety of ways and that it intends to test a parallel time recording system in one of its Divisions to determine just how much time is spent on indirect activities. Furthermore, it plans to explicitly recognize the time researchers spend on non-research institute type business by allocating unrestricted funds for these Institute Public Goods.

With respect to decentralization, the SC notes the recent trend towards a more decentralized staff placement. However, as pointed out by the Panel, this relates only to the two newer Divisions of IFPRI, DSGD and ISNAR, while the traditional Divisions -- MTID, FCND, and EPTD -- have hardly any field presence now at all. The SC recognizes the inherent positive and negative tradeoffs when posting staff outside of HQ. While the Panel made no recommendations or even suggestions regarding this interesting trend, the SC believes this is an important strategic aspect of how the Centre does its work, one that was correctly highlighted in the Centre’s Strategy document. In due course, the SC would hope to see a carefully considered plan of regional decentralization taking into account the relative merits of a strong set of research teams at HQ versus greater distribution of staff in the different regions. The Centre agreed that this issue needs careful consideration in the future.

The report identifies an important need for the Centre: to examine what its optimal disciplinary mix and make-up should be in relation to the optimal operation of its agreed themes. The SC concurs with the view that a more explicit treatment of the disciplinary sources of scientific expertise required by IFPRI for fulfilling its mission is required. For example, greater clarity in defining the role of political scientists, the use of various specialties within economics, and the approach to research within each specialty (e.g., the development of methods vs. applications of existing methods), reflect long-term strategic decisions about what research gets top priority. While the Centre has endorsed the recommendation on the need for a strategy for optimizing the mix of disciplinary competencies and research approaches, it believes the mix should be determined by the ongoing programmatic needs and not at a broader, strategic level. There is a risk, however, that such a bottom-up approach will fail to achieve this objective, i.e., that project leaders would define priorities and develop programmes that draw only on the more traditional (applied economics) disciplinary skills.
CGIAR Secretariat’s Comments on the Governance and Management Aspects of the IFPRI EPMR Report

The CGIAR Secretariat supports the governance and management related recommendations of the EPMR Panel and is pleased to note the positive response from IFPRI to these recommendations. We share the Science Council’s observations on the governance and management of IFPRI. We recommend that ExCo and the CGIAR endorse the Panel’s recommendations on governance and management of IFPRI.
March 17, 2005

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Dear Per and Francisco:

On behalf of the IFPRI Board of Trustees and Management, it is our pleasure to submit our response to the Fourth External Program and Management Review of the International Food Policy Research Institute, attached.

We are pleased that the panel found IFPRI’s overall performance to be highly positive. The Institute is seriously analyzing and considering all the recommendations and suggestions. We believe the Institute can fully address the issues that the Panel has raised.

We want to express our gratitude to the EPMR panel, led by its able chair Bruce Gardner, for its professionalism and for its positive and constructive report. Our thanks also go to you, the Secretariat staff, particularly Tim Kelley, for your assistance in ensuring the success of IFPRI’s Fourth EPMR.

Sincerely,

Isher Ahluwalia, (by E-MAIL)

Joachim von Braun
Director General

Isher Ahluwalia
Board Chair

Attachments: a/s
IFPRI RESPONSE TO THE 4TH EXTERNAL PROGRAM AND MANAGEMENT REVIEW
PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS

IFPRI management and the IFPRI Board of Trustees considered the 4th External Program and Management Review (EPMR) of IFPRI at its annual 2005 Board meeting (March 10, 2005). We are pleased by the Panel’s acknowledgement of IFPRI’s high quality research, communications, and capacity-strengthening work.

The Institute invested substantial resources preparing for the 4th External Program and Management Review (EPMR) to facilitate a successful assessment and to ensure that the process would add value to the Institute. We

- undertook a Center Commissioned External Review in 2003;
- ensured that the last two institute-wide Internal Program Reviews had discussions of the external reviews and focused on how IFPRI’s research fits in with the Institute’s strategy document;
- revised our communications and capacity-strengthening strategies in time for the EPMR;
- engaged fully in the World Bank’s performance indicators process on 2003 results; and
- developed several documents in addition to those the Panel requested – such as a summary of research and outreach highlights for the past six years.

IFPRI has made some modifications to its research portfolio over the past six years, and we appreciate the Panel recognizing that the Institute moves with agility and is able to make shifts to align its work with a changing environment. IFPRI will strive to remain focused on its priorities as defined by its living Strategy Document and areas of the comparative advantage as we move forward. The manner in which the Institute’s priority-setting process is used will be made more transparent to ensure that our research activities are a clear fit with IFPRI’s mandate.

We are delighted that the Panel’s surveys with peers, donors, and clients showed that IFPRI is believed to be the preeminent institution in global agriculture and rural development and the world’s premier source of applied research related to food policy issues in the developing world. IFPRI will continue to assess its research output to ensure its relevance and usefulness for our various audiences.

IFPRI is also pleased to note that the Panel finds the Institute to be highly relevant and that our research and outreach results are having substantial, beneficial impacts, and that our clients confirm this viewpoint. Impact assessment will remain a critical component of the Institute’s work and we will continue to strengthen this program during the next five-year period.

We welcome the positive feedback from other CGIAR centers about IFPRI’s inter-center collaborative efforts. The Institute is planning to increase collaborative arrangements to conduct research and capacity-strengthening activities with our sister
centers – and we believe the new CGIAR Alliance, inter-center initiatives, and other mechanisms will enhance our ability to do so.

**RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESPONSES**

**Chapter 2—Vision, Mission, and Strategy**

### #1. The Panel recommends that IFPRI sharpen its system of priority setting so that it will be more transparent how it decides what projects are most appropriately included in IFPRI’s research agenda, and which are best left undone or left to other research institutions.

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. IFPRI agrees with the Panel’s recommendations and will take steps to improve the transparency of its priority-setting process. In 2005, IFPRI is planning to have ex-ante review for seven new projects for the Institute’s medium-term plan. Researchers will explicitly state in their project proposal documentation how they meet IFPRI’s priority-setting criteria and why they should be included in IFPRI’s research agenda. The reviewers will assess if the priority-setting issues have been addressed satisfactorily. In addition, IFPRI will include a section in each project description for its upcoming 2006-08 Medium-Term Plan stating how the project meets the project selection criteria and merits being part of IFPRI’s research portfolio. Projects that cannot satisfactorily meet the criteria will be reassessed for inclusion in IFPRI’s medium-term plan.

**Chapter 3—Research … (DSGD)**

### #2. The Panel recommends an evaluation of the DSGD Division two years from now.

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. As the research activities being undertaken by this new division are innovative for IFPRI and the CGIAR system, we welcome the opportunity to have this division’s research work evaluated and to get the input from outside experts. We will schedule a review in two years.

**Chapter 3—Research … (MTID)**

### #3. The Panel recommends that MTID carry out a review of the work done in the field of global modeling and agricultural trade negotiations, with a view to determining how IFPRI can best make use of that work, and whether or not IFPRI should do its own modeling.

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. MTID plans to review the existing models on trade-related issues keeping in mind the trade negotiations while assessing how to best nurture its own modeling work. IFPRI believes that conducting its own modeling work is important. It also helps the Institute to maintain professional credibility to review other organization’s models. MTID also plans to get more engaged in issues being debated in trade negotiations through quantitative analyses.
**Chapter 3—Research … (ISNAR)**

#4. The Panel recommends that a Centre Commissioned External Review of the ISNAR Division should be carried out within two years to review its strategy and progress in implementing it.

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. IFPRI was planning to have a review of the ISNAR division in two years. In the meantime, ISNAR’s Program Advisory Committee established by the Board provides advice on the program’s development.

#5. The Panel recommends that IFPRI carefully assess what value involvement in the Global Open Agriculture and Food University adds to its programs.

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. IFPRI wants to ensure that its facilitation of the Global Open Food and Agricultural University on behalf of the centers will be a good fit within our strategy. One of the objectives of the distance education approach is to build greater capacity in agriculture economics and agriculture policy, an existing pillar in IFPRI’s strategy. In the long run, some of the high-quality postgraduates generated through this program will become research collaborators with IFPRI and other CGIAR center partners, resulting in more relevant, sustainable policy and agriculture research in the future.

**Chapter 4—Governance and Management (Governance)**

#6. The Panel recommends that the Board takes action in the following areas:

- Include a discussion within the Board that probes its own effectiveness, particularly in research quality review, regional and overall strategy development;

**IFPRI Response:** Although the Board does assess its effectiveness every three years, it recognizes the value of enhancing the review of its performance around areas of research quality review and strategy development, and will explore ways to do so.

The EPMR report uses publication in the top ten general economics journals as one criterion for publication quality (p. 21). However, many economics publications from IFPRI do appear in the top 20 of the top 100 refereed journals. This reflects the heavily empirical nature of the research, rather than the quality of the work. Nutrition journals, in general, accept more empirical work, while the top economics journals mostly require theoretical innovation and modeling, which is not typically the work that IFPRI does. We believe that the nature of IFPRI research should not be driven by the goal of publishing in these top economics journals.

- Use a planning process or other means to raise the Board’s sight to a long-term vision, and to forestall complacency;

**IFPRI Response:** We welcome the suggestion on developing a process for Board involvement in a long-term vision for the Institute, and the Board’s Program Committee will be making plans to do so. IFPRI would like to point out that the Board did request in 2002 the incoming Director General to develop a Strategic Plan for the Institute. This
Plan was developed over the following months and approved by the Board in March 2003. Moreover, the updated Strategy was reviewed by the Board at its March 2005 meeting.

- **Recruit at least one member with a strong financial background to lead more proactive financial oversight by the Board;**

**IFPRI Response:** The Board’s own terms of reference require that four members possess such a background. The current Trustees include the former head of a large company, the Board Chair of a major publishing firm, two foundation executives, and a former Board member of a U.S. regional Federal Reserve Bank, among others. Also, in the context of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, the U.S. Securities and Exchange issued a statement that defines a financial expert as someone that possesses an “understanding of generally accepted accounting principals and financial statements, an ability to assess the application of these principles in connection with accounting for estimates and reserves.” Both the Audit Committee and Executive Committee are proactive in assessing budgets and financial outcomes. All Board members review quarterly financial statements, which also include detailed commentary on variances and trends.

Furthermore, the report characterizes the Board’s process for recruiting new members as an informal one, without written guidelines (p. 52), whereas the Board has quite a detailed process spelled out in the *Handbook for Members of the IFPRI Board of Trustees*, and since the 3rd EPMR, the Board has adopted quite explicit policies with regard to regional, gender, and disciplinary balance on the Board.

- **Strengthen the structured evaluation process for the evaluation of the DG by adding multi-source assessment (360 degree) and objectives that go beyond organizational performance.**

**IFPRI Response:** An annual, structured evaluation process for the Director General was implemented in 2004 at the Board’s behest and the DG undertook a 360 degree assessment with the senior management team in 2004.

Chapter 4—Governance and Management (Organization and Management)

#7. The Panel recommends that:

- **To establish with some certainty the time spent on indirect activities (committees, fund-raising, conferences and presentations) that take time away from direct research work, and thus to provide better data for estimating time required for new projects, a system of time recording be instituted parallel to the existing one, on a trial basis, to cover an identified set of indirect activities.**

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. IFPRI agrees that indirect activities do take away time from direct research work and these contribute to time management issues at IFPRI. IFPRI’s Director General issued concept on time constraints in early January 2005 that details senior management’s plans to address this important institute-wide concern. IFPRI is now planning to use some of the Institute’s scarce unrestricted funds to cover
more staff contributions to Institute Public Goods – such as strategic documents, participation in search committees and task forces. A Hiring Taskforce has been formed to advise the Director General and Human Resources to make the hiring of senior staff quicker and more efficient. Staff travel will be monitored to assess if this is an issue that requires additional action in the future. Additionally, the senior management team decided that one division (EPTD) will test a parallel time recording system so that we can assess exactly how much time is spent on indirect activities. IFPRI believes this step will contribute important data to senior management as they formulate other means for facilitating better time management at IFPRI.

- To address the concern about the lack of two-way communication between the DG, Division Heads and staff, a management course on this and other managerial tasks be offered to Heads, after a multi-source (360 degree) survey.

**IFPRI response:** ENDORSED. IFPRI agrees that it could improve the two-way communication between division heads and staff. In 2004, bi-weekly divisional staff meetings were introduced (with agenda and minutes). The new Chief of Staff position is also expected to facilitate enhanced communication between the Director General and other staff. Division Directors have the opportunity to attend management training to enhance communication and effectiveness with their staff and will be encouraged to undergo 360 reviews with their own staff. Discussions are underway with a management consultant on the different methods IFPRI can use to improve communications.

Chapter 5—IFPRI-wide Issues and Challenges for the Future

#8. The Panel recommends that IFPRI should add to its strategy an approach to optimizing the mix of disciplinary competencies and research approaches as well as research areas.

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. As IFPRI broadens its research portfolio to include new programmatic areas – such as in ISNAR and the governance areas – the Institute is expanding its disciplinary competencies and research approaches. The Institute prefers to expand into these disciplines and approaches as the need from research priorities requires it.

#9. The Panel recommends instituting rolling Centre Commissioned External Reviews of each Division, with the objective of each Division undergoing review every 5 years.

**IFPRI Response:** PARTLY ENDORSED. IFPRI has agreed that its ISNAR and DSGD divisions should undergo reviews in 2 years. Given the inter-divisional nature of Institute’s work, individual divisional reviews could not be done in isolation – they would involve all other divisions to some extent. To reduce the amount of time spent in review, IFPRI would prefer to have its research and outreach divisions (including Communications) reviewed in clusters (two or three divisions at a time). While we agree that there is high value in having each division undergo a more in-depth Center
Commissioned review prior to an EPMR, the Institute would prefer to have several divisions reviewed together. The staff and administrative costs required and the potential disruption to research work to manage top-notch CCERs would be substantial if done for a single division on an annual basis.

#10. The Panel recommends that IFPRI should seriously consider an expanded visiting scholar program and other means to infuse IFPRI with cutting-edge ideas and proposals.

**IFPRI Response:** ENDORSED. IFPRI has benefited significantly from the cross-fertilization that its long-term visiting researchers bring to the Institute. Additionally, we have numerous shorter-term visiting researchers that provide varied multi-disciplinary contributions to specific research activities. We agree with the EPMR panel’s suggestion and plan to be even more strategic about inviting visiting researchers to contribute to cutting-edge research areas that the Institute does not sufficiently cover with its current staff.
February 23, 2005

Dr. Ken Fischer  
Chair, SC Standing Panel on Monitoring and Evaluation  
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Australia

Dr. Francisco Reifschneider  
Director  
Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research  
The World Bank  
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Dear Drs. Fischer and Reifschneider:

On behalf of the Panel, I am pleased to submit to you the Report of the Fourth External Programme and Management Review (EPMR) of the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). The Panel has reviewed, as requested, IFPRI’s performance in the four broad areas of: i) mission, strategy and priorities; ii) quality and relevance of the science; iii) effectiveness and efficiency of management (including governance); and iv) accomplishments and impact, as well as the specific list of questions posed by the Science Council.

As you will read, the Panel’s assessment of IFPRI’s overall performance is highly positive. IFPRI continues to be strong in its traditional areas of accomplishment and has made impressive efforts to move in the directions recommended in the third EPMR. The Panel has a number of recommendations for IFPRI, but these are aimed at positioning IFPRI as well as possible for future challenges, not at correcting critical problems that now exist.

This review was a challenging assignment for the Panel, but also a stimulating and rewarding one. Despite a wide background in experience and perspectives, the Panel had no significant disagreements that were expressed in our discussions, and the recommendations and assessments are truly unified views of the entire Panel.

The one regret that the Panel felt strongly was that we had to spend too much time absorbing and comprehending the huge quantity of research and related effort in the great number of projects IFPRI has undertaken during the review period. Although the Center-Commissioned External Review of 2004 was of substantial help, it would have been far better to have had detailed
reviews of each of IFPRI’s research divisions that the Panel could have drawn upon. What we missed in having to go a long way toward such reviews ourselves was the time to fully assess IFPRI’s achievements and prospects in the larger context of research in other institutions and IFPRI’s comparative advantage, both currently and in the likely future evolution of demand for social science research in the CGIAR. We were able to do this for some areas of IFPRI’s work, but not for other important areas or for IFPRI as a whole in the depth we would like to have done. This perception underlies the Panel’s recommendation for rolling annual reviews of IFPRI’s Divisions that would result in each Division undergoing an external review every five years.

IFPRI staff provided exemplary cooperation in responding to a large number of informational requests, and from the DG on through the entire organization, both in Washington D.C. and in the Panel’s field visits, IFPRI gave the Panel a feeling of being not just tolerated but welcome. The friendliness of everyone with whom we interacted at IFPRI made the work much more pleasant than it might have been.

Personally, I have to thank the SC for entrusting me with the task of chairing this Panel in view of my slight experience with IFPRI or the CGIAR generally. That placed an especially significant burden on the SC Secretariat’s representative on the Panel, Tim Kelley, whose many and continuous contributions were invaluable. I join the Panel in also thanking Selçuk Ozgediz and Manny Lantin for their advice and assistance.

Sincerely,

Bruce Gardner, Chair
External Review Panel
REPORT OF THE
FOURTH EXTERNAL PROGRAMME AND MANAGEMENT REVIEW
OF THE
INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
(IFPRI)

Review Panel: Bruce Gardner (Chair)
Louis Paul
Dunstan Spencer
Peter Svedberg
Alberto Valdès
Linxiu Zhang

Jan Masaoka (Consultant)

Timothy Kelley (SC Secretariat)
Manny Lantin (CGIAR Secretariat)
Selçuk Ozgediz (Resource Person)

SCIENCE COUNCIL SECRETARIAT
FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

February 2005
SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This Review covers the four broad areas of CGIAR Centre EPMRs: i) mission, strategy and priorities; ii) quality and relevance of the science; iii) effectiveness and efficiency of management (including governance); and iv) accomplishments and impact.

Vision, Mission and Strategy

IFPRI’s vision is stated as “a world free of hunger and malnutrition.” Its mission is to “provide policy solutions that cut hunger and malnutrition.” IFPRI’s strategy for achieving its mission is in part apparent from its organizational structure. Division of labour among types of activity is achieved through separate but related work in research, capacity strengthening, and communication. Division of labour among broad research areas is indicated in the names of the five Divisions. Beyond organizing activities along the lines of its Divisions, overall priorities are indicated through the criteria spelled out in IFPRI’s recent Strategy document: potential activities get higher priority by conforming to the above mission and by addressing “major emerging issues in food security,” focusing on international public goods, and helping “the greatest number of people in deepest need”. Pursuit of the priorities is intended to be furthered through the identification of research “themes.”

One element of IFPRI’s mission statement creates an ambiguity that is important when it comes to priority setting; namely, the extent to which policy research that is aimed at reducing poverty has to be directly relevant to food security. The Panel endorses the principle of going beyond agriculture and food security narrowly defined; however, the Panel believes IFPRI should focus on areas it is best suited to address, and not extend itself too far.

The issues that the Panel believes call for IFPRI’s attention involve not broad strategy, but rather matters of prioritization and of operational tactics for carrying out IFPRI’s highly ambitious agenda with maximum effectiveness. IFPRI’s 14 research themes are unhelpful as indicators of IFPRI’s priorities. Virtually every topic that involves food or poverty could be made to fit under one or another of them. The themes essentially place all IFPRI research on the same level of priority and do not serve, or are not used, as a tool for choosing among alternative research projects. Priorities are set more definitively in the process of project selection, which is less transparent.

Development Strategy and Governance Division (DSGD)

The mandate of this new Division, created in 2003, is to help identify the essential pre-conditions for successful pro-poor growth, and to strengthen developing country capacity for formulating and implementing national strategies. In assessing the Division, the Panel examined two broad issues - the development of a specific niche for DSGD vis-à-vis other entities, and what can be realistically expected of DSGD given its size and the broad and very challenging objectives. DSGD’s potential strength seems associated with three elements: experience with long-term cross-country research, a programme of
country-specific support activities, and a focus on capacity building at the country level. While recognizing the explicit commitment to keeping an economy-wide perspective in DSGD, the Panel is left uncertain regarding the intended balance between a sectoral versus an economy-wide focus, and between an agricultural versus a rural focus.

IFPRI’s research on the theme of *pro-poor public investment, priorities, finance and governance* is an example of relevant, innovative and rigorous empirical research very much in line with what makes IFPRI unique. The Panel considered whether DSGD could play a catalytic role in promoting social project evaluation of individual government investment projects, which would complement its role in the field of allocation of public expenditures. The Panel endorses the combination of cross-country and country-specific studies in analyzing development strategies. Country programmes should be supported by good research from cross-country analysis, but the research itself draws on relevant individual country experience. The *Strategic Analysis for Knowledge Support-(SAKKS)* is a laudable activity for IFPRI but it should be well-grounded in IFPRI research; otherwise it may not be distinguishable from work of a high level consulting firm. The Panel recognizes considerable progress in the identification of priority areas under the (new) *Governance Task Force*. However, IFPRI should consider how corruption and insecurity would be brought explicitly into this activity. Corruption could influence the optimal choice of specific policy instruments.

The Panel concludes that is premature to try to evaluate the impact of the DSGD at this stage, considering its recent creation and breadth of its task.

**Food Consumption and Nutrition Division (FCND)**

The Food Consumption and Nutrition Division (FCND) focuses on research that provides solutions to food insecurity and reduction of malnutrition in all forms at the household, community and country levels. As expressed by many IFPRI stakeholders and peers, FCND’s work is well known and highly regarded among development economists. The Panel concurs with that view, and would like to commend IFPRI for the overall achievements of the Division.

The *Diet Quality* project, aimed at identifying the reasons for and consequences of malnutrition, and at finding effective intervention policies, is a timely and urgent undertaking given the diets and health problems in developing countries. The programme *Large-scale Interventions to Enhance Human Capital Formation* fits well into FCND’s revealed competence. Although the longitudinal micro-level dataset being generated by IFPRI in four countries in its research on *Pathways out of Poverty* is valuable and arguably an international public good, the Panel has doubts about whether this project, focused on small specific communities, is likely to come to policy-relevant conclusions that have more than just local validity. Another project that raised some doubts was the *HIV/AIDS* project, given that IFPRI has little experience and track record in that area of research and for which its comparative advantage is not evident.
Environment and Production Technology Division (EPTD)

The overall goal of this Division is to achieve agricultural growth and poverty reduction with environmental sustainability. EPTD’s relatively long standing in the areas of property rights, sustainable development of less-favoured areas and water resource allocation research have provided the Division with opportunities to establish its leading position in both research communities and policy effects in developing countries. The Panel commends EPTD for its work in these areas.

Having the IMPACT model as a well-developed research and analytical tool has made it possible for EPTD to collaborate widely within and outside of IFPRI on various policy analysis and commodity and resource use projections. IMPACT model projections of global food, agriculture and environment have provided foundations for the Centre’s 2020 Initiative which are widely recognized as effective means of increasing public awareness and enabling it to dialogue with both developed and developing countries at agricultural and food policy levels. However, the Panel cautions against depending too much on a single, complex model to address the variety of topics covered by this Division.

The work in the area of biodiversity and biotechnology policy has enabled the Centre to gain significant recognition in the research community. The programme for biosafety systems (inherited from former ISNAR) will further enhance the Centre’s capacity for participating in high level policy discussion. The Panel considers the work in these areas to be highly relevant and of good quality.

Markets, Trade, and Institutions Division (MTID)

This Division, like DSGD, is new – it was formed by consolidating parts of two previous Divisions of IFPRI. In the Panel’s view, this restructuring and the creation of MTID was a logical integration and should provide a stronger focus on the important links between international trade and domestic markets and institutions. The new Division focuses on the analysis of the structure and performance of domestic and international markets for agricultural products.

MTID and outside collaborators have made important contributions in the area of food regulation and safety which is of paramount importance for trade in high-value perishable products. In the Panel’s view, research on agricultural trade negotiations in the WTO and their implications for developing countries should rank high in MTID’s agenda. As part of MTID’s work on Globalization and Markets, IFPRI should give serious attention to the issue of what specific contribution it will make in the area of global trade modelling, and the expertise, partnerships and resources required to make this contribution. As part of that process, IFPRI should undertake a systematic review of the various global models.

A dominant theme of the Division and one that is emerging as a critical issue in development is the Future of Smallholder Farming. The Panel concurs with the emphasis given to this topic in MTID and highlights the need for addressing the many
transitional challenges the smallholder will face with rapidly evolving agricultural production and food systems.

Of the new activities in this Division, the Southeast Asia Initiative (SAI) appears to be one of the strongest, in terms of clarity of objectives, maturity of the research programme, existing staff and collaborators, and research, networking and outreach activities. The Panel believes the SAI model is probably transferable to other regions and would suggest consideration be given to embarking on a similar initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa.

ISNAR Division

IFPRI has moved quickly and efficiently to address the tasks given to it by the CGIAR when the ISNAR mandate was transferred to it in early 2004. The Panel would like to strike a note of caution, however, regarding the dangers of mission creep, duplication of efforts between the Division and other IFPRI programmes, and what appears to be an excessively speculative research agenda. The Panel commends the Division for steps taken so far to revise the training modules and devolve training events to regional partners.

There are ongoing concerns about the comparative advantage of the CGIAR in setting up of the Global Agriculture and Food University (GOAFU). The Panel is concerned that IFPRI itself may not have a comparative advantage in managing the project.

Communications Division

Through its communications work, IFPRI seeks to increase the impact of its research by using appropriate means to engage key stakeholders in a continuous dialogue. The Division succeeded in publicizing the activities of the Centre in high profile electronic and print media. The Panel commends the IFPRI for its effective communications programme.

Director General’s Office (DGO)

The 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment has been a high profile research and advocacy activity of IFPRI during the last decade, and must be credited as one of the major initiatives that have buttressed the case for agriculture-led economic development of poor countries, and contributed to putting agriculture back in the portfolio of donors and policy makers, especially in Africa.

IFPRI’s work on the returns to policy research, and particularly the impact of its own products and services, has been innovative and has set the standard for applied research in this important area. In addition, IFPRI’s reviews of rates of return to agricultural research in other CGIAR centres have had a significant impact. The findings foster confidence that new initiatives in agricultural research are likely to pay off.
The HarvestPlus Challenge Programme was launched in 2003 and builds on earlier exploratory activities conducted by IFPRI, CGIAR centres and other collaborators. Overall the Panel finds that IFPRI’s leadership of the HarvestPlus CP has been commendable and that the programme has great potential.

The Panel finds the donor relations activity well managed. IFPRI has a clear fund-raising strategy that recognizes the important changes that have taken place in recent years, including the trend by many donors to shift to restricted funding. IFPRI has produced an impressive record in fund raising in the period under the review.

**Governance and Management**

The IFPRI Board demonstrates the qualifications, diversity and attention required for governance in a rapidly evolving organization. It has supported changes in the Institute, and shifted its own composition and agendas to support the “new IFPRI.” The Panel suggests that the oversight provided by the Board should be complemented by proactive inquiry into various financial matters.

IFPRI’s Senior Management Team (SMT), augmented by committees and task-forces, provides a practical balance between a top-down and a participative approach to managing an organization. However, Management has not solved the long-standing issue of time pressures faced by Staff who have to perform a number of activities, including fund raising. Communications between management and staff also needs improvement.

IFPRI has managed its income and expenditures prudently.

The Panel commends the Centre for its gender balance (58% of total staff are female; 33% of senior staff are female), and for initiatives taken in this area.

**Future Challenges**

*Responding to demand:* In general, IFPRI has moved with impressive agility for an organization of its size to align its work with changing demands. This adaptability and willingness to take on more tasks has its costs. It places strains upon IFPRI’s ability to focus upon its stated priorities and to stay within its areas of comparative advantage. This strain appears so far not to have been a serious problem in that the new demands fit well within IFPRI’s expertise.

The strong position of IFPRI in the market for food and agricultural policy research in the international development context is abetted by the decline or stagnation of competing organizations. IFPRI’s longstanding comparative advantage as a food policy research institution not only is retained but is increasing. The challenge facing IFPRI is how to make its priority setting work best to keep the research agenda as productive as possible.

*Quality of Research:* The essential input for high quality research is highly qualified and motivated researchers. IFPRI draws post-doctoral researchers with excellent credentials.
IFPRI’s more senior staff also have earned a reputation as dedicated and competent researchers.

IFPRI has undertaken a number of quality-enhancing activities that the Panel commends – the publications review process, its seminar series with notable outside speakers, the brown-bag lunches, and the tools and methods task force, among others. A potentially serious problem for IFPRI is constraints on its capabilities to supply the services its donors are willing to pay for. An emerging challenge relates to the risk of a decline in the quality of research processes as given resources are strained to generate additional output. Increasing time pressure was the most commonly expressed source of dissatisfaction in the Panel’s staff survey. There is no more important immediate task for management than finding ways to remedy this problem.

In terms of research output, annual publication of refereed journal articles per senior staff researcher increased from 0.7 in 1993-98 to 1.4 in 1998-2004, an impressive rate of improvement. IFPRI authors during 1998-2004 published 131 articles in the top 100 journals (using a recent international ranking of journals), although IFPRI authors had only six articles in the top 20 journals. A study of citations of IFPRI authors indicates that IFPRI’s work is cited as much or more than that of comparable research institutions – a good achievement. However, it is also evident that the quality of IFPRI’s publications output is heterogeneous. The challenge facing IFPRI is how to maintain its high reputation among donors and peers for its best products, while reducing the heterogeneity of perceived quality.

Relevance and Impact: IFPRI has made and is making choices that focus its work on topics on which clients thirst for knowledge. In this most important sense, IFPRI scores high on relevance. The Panel’s assessment is that IFPRI is having substantial influence, if not impact, and the influence is beneficial. Also, IFPRI’s influence is seen to be increasing, at least in the post-1990 period as compared to earlier years, and to some extent in the last six years as IFPRI’s engagement with developing countries has become better organized and sustained. The challenge facing IFPRI is that social science impact is notoriously difficult to measure, and there are no pathways to carrying out impact assessment that will be convincing to everyone. The Panel commends IFPRI for its serious and sustained efforts to move forward on the impact assessment agenda.

Collaborations, Capacity Strengthening, and Decentralization: The scope and quantity of IFPRI’s involvement with other Centres and leadership of important multi-centre programmes is impressive. Other Centres have given an overwhelmingly positive assessment of their collaborations with IFPRI. A challenge faced by IFPRI is that collaboration and decentralization of research are hard to manage while simultaneously focusing on cutting edge research. IFPRI will have to continue to make some of its most difficult top-level decisions in the area of resource allocation between headquarters and regional centre research. The Panel commends the steps that have been taken and the care with which they have been managed so far.

Organization and Management: A major challenge for IFPRI is how to manage its growth. Backlogs in hiring have contributed substantially to the “time-famine”
phenomenon referred to earlier. More fundamental, because they will persist even when the growth spurt is accommodated, are personnel and programme management issues that define what kind of organization IFPRI is and will become. Similar organizational issues arise with respect to decentralization. Do the gains from spreading people out exceed the losses? One could argue that the real purpose of decentralization is to get as much as possible of IFPRI into a developing country without damaging the political equilibrium that put IFPRI in Washington in the first place.

The Panel’s overall assessment of IFPRI’s performance since the last Review is overwhelmingly positive. The Panel concludes that IFPRI, during a period of considerable change in the external environment and rapid growth in the Centre itself, has successfully managed to integrate its research, capacity strengthening and outreach activities whilst continuing to generate outputs and services of high relevance to developing countries. It has substantially increased its publications in refereed journals, shown exemplary leadership in the CGIAR’s CP, Systemwide Programmes and other work with CGIAR centres, and IFPRI staff are highly regarded amongst peers and partners. These achievements point to highly effective management of both programmatic and administrative components of IFPRI, for which the management team is to be congratulated. In the Panel’s view, IFPRI is well positioned to take up the challenges ahead.

Recommendations

**Chapter 2. Vision, Mission and Strategy**
1. The Panel recommends that IFPRI sharpen its system of priority setting so that it will be more transparent how it decides what projects are most appropriately included in IFPRI’s research agenda, and which are best left undone or left to other research institutions.

**Chapter 3. Research … (DSGD)**
2. The Panel recommends an external evaluation of the DSGD two years from now.

**Chapter 3. Research … (MTID)**
3. The Panel recommends that MTID carry out a review of the work done in the field of global modelling and agricultural trade negotiations, with a view to determining how IFPRI can best make use of that work, and whether or not IFPRI should do its own modelling.

**Chapter 3. Research … (ISNAR)**
4. The Panel recommends that a Centre Commissioned External Review of the ISNAR Division should be carried out within two years to review its strategy and progress in implementing it.

5. The Panel recommends that IFPRI carefully assess what value involvement in the Global Open Agriculture and Food University adds to its programmes.
Chapter 4. Governance and Management (Governance)

6. The Panel recommends that the Board takes action in the following areas:
   - Include a discussion within the Board that probes its own effectiveness, particularly in research quality review, regional and overall strategy development;
   - Use a planning process or other means to raise the Board’s sight to a long-term vision, and to forestall complacency;
   - Recruit at least one member with a strong financial background to lead more proactive financial oversight by the Board; and
   - Strengthen the structured evaluation process for the evaluation of the DG by adding multi-source assessment (360 degree) and objectives that go beyond organizational performance.

Chapter 4. Governance and Management (Organization and Management)

7. The Panel recommends that:
   - To establish with some certainty the time spent on indirect activities (committees, fund-raising, conferences and presentations) that take time away from direct research work, and thus to provide better data for estimating time required for new projects, a system of time recording be instituted parallel to the existing one, on a trial basis, to cover an identified set of indirect activities.
   - To address the concern about the lack of two-way communication between the DG, Division Heads and staff, a management course on this and other managerial tasks be offered to Heads, after a multi-source (360 degree) survey.

Chapter 5: IFPRI-wide Issues and Challenges for the Future

8. The Panel recommends that IFPRI should add to its strategy an approach to optimizing the mix of disciplinary competencies and research approaches as well as research areas.

9. The Panel recommends instituting rolling Centre Commissioned External Reviews of each Division, with the objective of each Division undergoing review every 5 years.

10. The Panel recommends that IFPRI should seriously consider an expanded visiting scholar programme and other means to infuse IFPRI with cutting-edge ideas and proposals.