



May 9, 1997

CHAIRMAN'S LETTER TO HEADS OF DELEGATION

Dear Colleagues:

Dramatic developments in the field of biotechnology over past few months have drawn attention to the application of this branch of science in numerous areas, especially that of agricultural development. Biotechnology, once considered only a dream with enormous future potential, is now a reality in our midst; an important, even critical, tool in agricultural research to produce more food for a growing world population.

However, the needs of the poorest regions may not be of interest to the private sector, the major "player" in biotechnology research, because most private products have no market among the very poor. If we do not act on behalf of the millions now condemned to poverty, the advantages of biotechnology will simply pass them by.

The capacity of the CGIAR to serve as a bridge builder between institutions at the vanguard of research in agricultural biotechnology and the national agricultural research systems (NARS) whose efforts directly benefit poor farmers and consumers in the South therefore needs to be fully discussed at the Cairo Mid-Term Meeting (MTM97). As you know, time has been reserved at MTM97 for discussion in both plenary and parallel sessions of the range of issues involved as we seek to provide NARS with access to the advantages of biotechnology for sustainable food security.

In preparation for our discussions in Cairo, I convened a biotechnology consultation, following a well-established CGIAR practice. The centers, TAC, our partners from the NGO community and the private sector, and the international scientific community were represented. The purpose of the consultation was to review the state-of-the-art both within and outside the CGIAR System, and to discuss the needs and opportunities for CGIAR programs and investments in biotechnology research.

The biotechnology consultation was not meant to reach any formal decisions, and it did not. The airing of views was very useful, however, as a backdrop

to our discussion in Cairo. Overall, the messages I received from the consultation were that:

- the CGIAR should recognize that biotechnology is an added tool, not a magic bullet,
- on that basis, and in view of the accelerated pace of biotechnology research in the world, the CGIAR should proceed with efforts to enhance its capacity for biotechnology research with a special emphasis on such technologies as molecular markers, and a strong link to breeding, farm systems at the smallholder level and ecological considerations,
- investment in biotechnology will need to be increased by a significant amount,
- stronger partnerships and collaboration are required within the CGIAR System as well as between CGIAR centers and others engaged in biotechnology research,
- the CGIAR should position itself to ensure that advances in biotechnology can be harnessed for the benefit of the poor and for the protection of the environment; and should vigorously promote public awareness of the context in which its biotechnology research programs are carried out.

In all this, of course, we should bear in mind the need to maintain an equitable balance between what is technically feasible and ethically acceptable. Both considerations need to be boldly confronted. I look forward to a vigorous and productive discussion of these issues at MTM97. We cannot afford to fall back as advances in agro-biotechnology surge ahead.

The Centers -- An Update

In my previous letter, I shared with you some thoughts about developments at the older, larger centers, where the need for substantial staff reductions and programmatic restructuring was causing personal hardship and professional disquiet. I stressed, as I have done before, the need to meet our moral obligations to the staff and, at the same time, maintain scientific excellence. The inevitability of change should not blind us to the hardships and pain usually inherent in any process of transformation.

I have been pleased to learn that, despite the magnitude of the problems encountered, the process of changes is moving well along to completion. Current staff reductions at IRRI have been completed and the center is preparing itself to fulfill its

responsibilities under new modalities. ICRISAT's staff reduction program is almost complete.

I compliment IRRI and ICRISAT -- and CIAT which completed an effective program of change earlier -- for their courage and creativity in responding to very serious difficulties. The human issues involved cannot be under-estimated. We cannot, however, let matters simply stand at congratulations alone.

At ICW96 I urged all members to look again at each case of underfunding of all the older centers and to try to meet their needs expeditiously. Now, in the face of decisive and difficult actions by the centers, we cannot turn away from them. I urge you to ensure that funding for these centers is not curtailed, and that their programs are fully funded. The important initiatives already in place must not be allowed to suffer. We must dig deeper into our pockets to support these centers and ensure that they never again be harrassed by a similar plight.

System Review

On April 18, I met separately with representatives of the CGIAR who were in Washington for the biotechnology consultation, to discuss primarily the forthcoming third System Review.

I am delighted to inform you that since I last wrote (on March 11) the System Review panel (which will be chaired by Maurice Strong) has been fully constituted and consists of the following eight members other than the panel chair: Bruce Alberts (USA), Kenzo Hemmi (Japan), Yolanda Kakabadse (Ecuador), Klaus Leisinger (Switzerland), Whitney McMillan (USA), Bongiwe Njobe-Mbuli (South Africa), Emil Salim (Indonesia), and M. S. Swaminathan (India). Mahinder Shah (Kenya) will be the panel's Secretary. Three of the panel members will chair specialist panels as follows: Science -- Bruce Alberts, Strategy and Structure -- M. S. Swaminathan, and Governance and Finance -- Emil Salim.

This is a distinguished and truly international panel, representing a diversity of disciplines, interests, and a formidable array of experience. The panel can be counted on to examine critically and thoroughly the range of issues that will affect the future effectiveness of the CGIAR as a center of scientific excellence and an instrument of development. The Secretariat has consulted widely on the membership of the specialist panels. Their composition will be announced at MTM97.

Maurice Strong and I have on several occasions revisited the substance and logistics of the review. He welcomed the composition of the review panel, and broadly endorsed its terms of reference, which are known to all of you. He agreed that the review should be forward looking; focused on the quality and relevance of science at the centers; and particularly concerned with the strategy, forms of governance

May 9, 1997

and finance that will enable the CGIAR System to position itself most effectively within the global agricultural research effort.

Mr. Strong cannot join us in Cairo, because of a scheduling conflict. He expects to be able to communicate his views to us electronically. Meanwhile, the Secretariat will be in touch with you about arrangements for presenting your concerns and interests to the panel in a formal way, when the review has been launched. Your insights will be a crucial contribution to the successful completion of the review.

With best wishes, and looking forward to working with you in Cairo.

Sincerely,

Ismail Serageldin
Chairman, CGIAR

Attachment

Lists of Participants at Consultations