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Other Business

Quality of Communications between Donors and Centers in the CGIAR

The attached paper on communications between CGIAR donors and centers was developed on behalf of Center Directors by Eugene Terry, Director General, WARDA. The paper will be taken up under "Other Business" at International Centers Week.

Attachment

Distribution

CGIAR Members
Center Board Chairmen
Center Directors
TAC Chairman
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TAC Secretariat
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Improving the Quality of Communications Between Donors and Centers in the CGIAR

A Strategy Paper from CGIAR Center Directors Group
developed by
E.R. Terry
Director General, WARDA
on behalf of Center Directors Group

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Introduction and Purpose of Paper

The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) is currently engaged in a series of analyses relating to its growth, dimensions and directions in the short, medium and long term. The topics currently being discussed relate to strategic issues such as the environment, conservation of natural resources, malnutrition and poverty, strengthening of National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS), and the prospects for continued growth and long-term financial support of the (originally thirteen (13) sixteen (16) Center research network. Indeed, a major review is underway to study the dynamics and structure of an expanded CGIAR.

Since the first draft of this paper was developed, TAC has made certain recommendations to the group which have implications for the long-term structure of the CGIAR and the mandates of existing centers. In addition, TAC has recommended expanded commodity and subject-matter coverage through the incorporation of some of the activities of the Associated centers. Indeed, three (3) of these associated centers have become full CGIAR centers, viz: IIMI, ICRAF and INIBAP.

Furthermore, TAC has recommended an explicit broadening of the CGIAR’s mission and goals to include sustainability, natural resource management and food self-reliance. It is to be noted that these changes move the CGIAR away from a self-imposed limitation to food crops and an implicit commitment to national food self-sufficiency.

Center Directors have been encouraged by both the CGIAR and Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) Chairmen, and by several donors to participate more actively in the strategic thinking required to deal with these very important issues.

Accordingly, Center Directors have identified emerging high priority strategic issues wherein their collective thinking will contribute to the CGIAR’s decision making process. Thus, they have initiated a series of interactions between themselves and donor organizations in order to raise the level of their intellectual dialogue, and to better understand the dynamics that determine each other’s strategic actions; in short, to improve the “quality of communications” between the two parties.

It is envisaged that improved communications will facilitate complementarity in planning to achieve the original purpose of International Agricultural Research Centers (IARC) i.e. "to conduct research leading to improvement of food crops and farming systems, focusing on the elimination of hunger and poverty in the developing countries".

The purpose of this paper is to establish a continuing process for a better understanding of the changing circumstances under which Centers and donors operate as they attempt to play their respective roles in the development process. This paper should therefore be regarded as the initial act in that process. Center Directors wish to explore through this process, the current thinking of individuals and groups within the CGI system, on a host of issues.

The reactions and comments on an earlier version of this paper have been integrated into this text. These valuable interventions are hereby gratefully acknowledged, and the names of the co-respondents are listed at the end of the paper.
The paper deals with the following areas of immediate concern as they relate to the topic:

(i) the role of research in the development process;
(ii) donor groups' characteristics and roles in the CGIAR;
(iii) CGIAR network of centers, their characteristics and activities;
(iv) the emerging strategic issues within the CGIAR which impact on donors and centers;
(v) mechanisms for achieving donor/center complementarity in the development process by improving the quality of communications between them;

For the purpose of this paper, "communications" will be defined as the exchange of messages and signals between individuals or system units so that common understanding can be created.

**The Role of Agricultural Research in the Development Process**

Within the context of the CGIAR and its 16 Center research network, research is designed to generate technological changes in agriculture and is a crucial ingredient for the economic development required by developing countries. All sixteen Centers therefore have developed their activities with a view to increasing agricultural production on a sustainable basis in developing countries. The expectation is that this will in turn increase farm incomes, reduce food costs and improve on human nutrition.

But it is not only technological changes that result from the activities of the CGIAR Centers. Centers also contribute to the strengthening of national agricultural research capabilities through a range of collaborative networks. This is accomplished primarily through the training programs they conduct, through facilitation of research and communication networks, through publications of scientific information and the development and dissemination of new methods of agricultural research and improved technologies.

Centers' activities are effective vehicles for the enhancement of the capabilities of the major users of their research, the national or adapting scientists. Theirs is the long-term responsibility for generating new technology on a continuing basis to solve production problems specific to their agro-ecological and socio-economic conditions.

**Donor Groups' Characteristics and Roles in the CGIAR**

Since its creation, the CGIAR has grown from 4 centers funded by 8 donors at about US$20 million annually to its current 16 centers with contributions from 40 donors at a level of US$237 million annually (1991 funding estimate).

In the beginning, the donors to the CG system were convinced that research could directly contribute to increase "the pile of rice" in developing countries - as Forrest Hill, one of the CGIAR's founders put it. That conviction still has validity although new concerns for sustainability and equity make the task more complex. It is evident that there is a crucial role here for the CGIAR centers, because of their comparative advantage. This comparative advantage should be fully utilized by the donors. However, since many facets of sustainability require long-term research commitments, the CGIAR should not be put under undue pressure to produce immediate results.

There is a need for consensus among donors, centers and client national programs as to the most effective formula for resource allocation. It should be noted also, that there are legitimate concerns in certain donor countries, that increased international research may affect the donor countries' competitiveness in international markets.
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Donor countries and their agencies, however, are autonomous and each has its own unique set of policies. It may be useful therefore to distinguish "donors", categorize them into types and use this analysis to establish trends and patterns of donors' concerns and behavior within the context of the CGIAR.

Based on observation and current trends, donors may be categorized into three groups viz. (i) Stabilizers, (ii) Innovators and (iii) Regionalists.

The characteristics of these three categories can be summarized as follows:

(i) Stabilizers: These donors have a strong commitment to the system itself, and wish to see it prosper. While they may have strong views on international research priorities, they are likely to respond to TAC's funding recommendations fairly directly, and to provide unrestricted core contributions to centers. They recognize the diffused and iterative nature of decision making in the system and work on various levels within that process to influence the outcome. As core contributors, these donors value institution-level financial reporting, and the system's External Review processes.

(ii) Innovators: These donors have a commitment to research for development. Each such donor agency has in-house capacity to generate a specific opinion on which research activities should be undertaken by the Centers and which they wish to fund. Much of their funding is project specific, or restricted to particular activities, and negotiated in some detail with the Center concerned. It is usually the view of these donors that they are "leading" the Center in a direction which the Center ought to be moving more rapidly. (Note role of IDRC on farming systems, of Rockefeller on biotechnology, UNDP on germplasm distribution, all of them on networks). These donors participate in group meetings and have a vision of the system as it is evolving. In following the deliberations of TAC, they are more interested in new initiatives. Their starter role and their intellectual input to the Centers has always been considerable.

(iii) Regionalists: These donors have a commitment to the development of a particular country or region. They are interested in the CGIAR system because it allows them to meet the needs of their clients, the developing countries. Their funding is always project specific, and heavily weighted toward institution-building through training, networks, etc. Their accountability requirements are exacting, and project based. They look to TAC for an indication that the centers have the capacity to implement certain projects. Donor interlocutors dealing with such projects generally do not attend group meetings.

The foregoing categorization notwithstanding, there exists to some degree, factions typifying "Stabilizers", "Innovators", and "Regionalists" within each of the donor organizations. An emerging group of donors is one which may be categorized as "discipline promoters."

In summary, while there appears to be commitment among donors for strong support to the system, high priority is now also being given to national programs' research support. It is encouraging, however, to note that this trend may not necessarily result in the exclusion or diminution of support to international research activities. However, even where the tendency towards increasing support for NARs does not result in diminishing funding to the Centers, there is the continuing need for tripartite interactions that bring together NARs, Centers and donors.

The emerging funding pattern is to combine financial assistance to centers and their NARs partners for complementary activities of mutual interest. In this respect, there is a trend towards a requirement on the part of the donor, for an endorsement of the activity by the national scientists and policy makers. For example, recently, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) had indicated that it is now particularly interested in funding projects in the CGI Centers in Latin America, which its constituents in Latin America have certified as being of high priority. This decision had posed serious problems for these centers, but it appears some acceptable compromises have been agreed upon.
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With certain donors, the greatest portion of their funding support is allocated as bilateral financing of national programs, viz. government agencies, universities, NGOs, etc. This type of funding is provided for activities which are identified as priorities by national programs within the framework of priorities established by the donor organization.

Invariably, donor country priorities in agriculture are shaped by the overriding objective of improving opportunities for the poor. It is important to note, however, that it is not always immediately clear how, and how quickly, research can contribute to the alleviation of hunger and underemployment, especially long term strategic research. Yet, many donors are under great pressure from the public in their countries to support programs which are structured so as to be visibly helping the poor.

Dialogue between donors and the Centers to emphasize the need for long term commitments in research, as well as the need to increase scientific capability in NARS that will indirectly help the poor is timely. Such dialogue will serve to elucidate the processes through which donor policies are formulated. It will also afford Centers the opportunities to participate in the discussions relating to the implementation of these policies.

**CGIAR Network of Centers. Their Characteristics and Activities**

Centers in the CGIAR context are independent and autonomous research institutions generating urgently needed technology and training that could not be done by national programs. Additional characteristics of centers relating to their governance, mandates and programs are well documented in a number of CGIAR publications.

In addition to the specific research areas for which international financial support is provided to the centers, this funding supports several activities at the centers which in turn backstop the agricultural research activities in national programs.

Currently, weak national agricultural research systems demand more of the results produced from international level research than eventual comparative advantage will dictate. In making strategic choices relating to upstream and downstream research, Centers have to distinguish between (i) activities with a continuing comparative advantage at the international level, and (ii) activities justified over the medium term by the current lack of capacity in the developing countries.

A significant number of NARS, however, are accumulating the required numbers of trained and qualified scientists able to undertake what used to be CG Center type research efficiently and at less cost. This will continue to be a major factor driving certain Centers further upstream.

The timeliness of the dialogue on upstream/downstream research is best illustrated by the text of a message sent recently to Center Directors from one of its members. The message relates to the Center Director's concern about "TAC's major effort in pushing centers upstream while we still have some donors and many clients wanting us to move further downstream with activities". It is clear that there is a need to address this issue "head-on before there are more mixed signals confusing donors and clients".

Center Directors would welcome donor thinking as to whether a credible case cannot be made for "midstream" research especially at a time when Centers are being "encouraged" to move rapidly upstream. In the absence of the required capabilities in the NARS, many developing countries may be unable to exploit scientific developments resulting from CG Centers' research.

The diversity between the NARS' capacities and needs within a continent and among continents is such that it is logical for the centers to oscillate from upstream to downstream activities according to regions, problems and research areas. Each Center must seek, in consultation with donors and NARS, a sensitive balance between upstream and downstream research that best permits it to realize the particular goals in its mandate. ICRISAT, for example, cooperates in research in India; on the one hand with the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, and, on the other, the National Institute for Remote Sensing.
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With regard to downstream research, one of the currently favored mechanisms utilized by centers is to facilitate linkages between weaker NARS and stronger ones who have benefitted from earlier collaboration with CG Centers through networks.

To increase the rate of adoption of "new" technologies from Centres and other sources, centers can play a role through on-farm research to move the process forward. Some Centres are now addressing this issue by the establishment of research liaison units or international cooperation programs. These units are directly involved in training and information dissemination, and serve as a link between the Centers' programs and NARS activities as appropriate. This subject warrants more in-depth consideration and consultation with technology-transfer agencies, e.g. FAO.

TAC, the centers and certainly the donors are actively debating the merits of the various mechanisms that may be adopted for more efficient NARs/center interactions. Indeed, this topic is the subject of a TAC paper currently being discussed by the Group.

Emerging Strategic Issues Impacting on Center/Donor Communications

The International Agricultural Research Centers were conceived and designed to facilitate the acquisition and utilization of the world's stock of knowledge, scientific talent, and germplasm for the solution of problems relating to hunger and poverty in developing countries.

It is safe to assume that over the last 20 years of its formal existence, the CGIAR Centers, in partnership with researchers and administrators in the national agricultural systems of developing countries, have achieved success in various ways. They have certainly succeeded in generating technologies for higher productivity adapted to the conditions in those countries. In addition, they have succeeded in enhancing the research capabilities of the national systems.

While resulting increases in food production have been shown to be a necessary ingredient for sustained economic and agricultural development, poverty alleviation and a brake on environmental degradation will constitute major objectives yet to be achieved. In other words, problems relating to malnutrition, poverty, food supply, sustainability and conservation of natural resources continue to require major attention by the global agricultural research system.

The priority should now shift to research designed to exploit existing technologies through a strong emphasis on resource management for improved crop, animal and forestry productivity. In this connection, an emerging issue is that which dictates that major efforts be expended on building the capacity of the national agricultural research services to develop farmer-oriented technological innovations.

Institution-building strategies need to be modified to fit the current stages of human resource development in target national programs. There is the sense that we are all groping for valid indicators of the current level of institutional scientific and political maturity of these national programs. In this respect donors continue to struggle with the decisions relating to the size and scope of their investments in international Centers and national programs for research, training and extension.

There is a growing tendency towards the involvement of centers in the role of "broker" with regard to center funds destined for national agricultural research activities. Some donor representatives suggest that the topic of center effectiveness in institution-building, as well as their role in the coordination of multilateral and bilateral funding at the national level, deserves further attention from centers.

Although evidence indicates that indeed investment in agricultural research and development in national programs has increased considerably over the past 20 years, the financial situation in these countries has deteriorated so rapidly to the extent that the effectiveness of donor investments has been jeopardized.
Most if not all of these emerging issues call for continuing dialogue between Centers, donors and their clients to ensure that there is a basic level of understanding of the priority requirements for better organization and management of research institutions, their programs, systems and networks. IDRC, for example has stated that "emerging strategic issues in the CGIAR" are unlikely to affect its funding modalities because their programming already includes many of the commodities and natural resource management components being considered for incorporation within the CGIAR.

The Overseas Development Administration, United Kingdom, through its publication entitled "A Strategy for Research on Renewable Natural Resources (RNR)" has indicated that it expects the centers to provide support for international RNR to cover fisheries, forestry and other environmentally important subject areas.

**Mechanisms for Achieving Donor/Center Complementarity Through Quality Communications**

The mechanisms that will eventually be identified as a result of this dialogue process to ensure "quality" communications between donors and centers, should complement existing mechanisms within the CGIAR. The regular CGIAR Chairman’s letter to the Group, and more recently the addition of a report from the TAC Chairman are responses to the needs of donors for quality communications.

Center Directors and donors must seek mechanisms which will not only complement the CG Chairman’s and TAC Chairman’s letters and reports, but which in addition will afford each other the possibilities for direct, timely, and continuing interaction on current and emerging strategic issues.

A survey of the limited responses to the initial request for new mechanisms of communications indicates a need to revisit currently available mechanisms. However, in revisiting these mechanisms, centers and donors must be aware of the gaps in their knowledge about the inner workings of their respective organizations. What this dialogue is likely to reveal is that donors may indeed not be as knowledgeable about “their” Centers as they had assumed. On the other hand, some Centers have been associated with “their” donors for years without truly understanding the full range of interactions within these organizations.

To compound these issues, the frequent personnel changes in donor organizations significantly affect its relationship with a Center. The fundamental premise of this paper is that there are emerging strategic issues which impact on centers and donors to the extent that both sides need to be educated as to how these strategic issues will affect their relationships.

There is certainly an opportunity here for the CG Secretariat and the Center personnel themselves to increase the in-house expertise of donor organizations’ staff. In many cases, the link between the Centers and the donor is maintained through one or two individuals on the donor side who have developed extensive knowledge about the CG system and the centers in particular. Here once again, changes in personnel as a result of promotions or other movement, may result in a serious gap in the continuity in donor-center linkages.

There are some recurring themes that donors have suggested must be addressed to enable them to improve their understanding of centers’ issues. The terminology, phrases and ideas expressed with some consistency are: "impact"; "transparency"; "measures of Center effectiveness"; "cost effectiveness"; "innovations"; "overview"; "involvement and integration with national programs"; "strengthening national research capabilities"; "collaborative arrangements with NARS"; "collaborative arrangements with research organizations in donor countries"; "functional center/donor/NARS forum"; "coordination of bilateral and multilateral funding"; "inter-Center collaboration" and "sustainability".

While a substantial number of the themes/topics presented above also constitute areas of concern to centers, there are indeed issues which Center Directors would very much wish donors to address. These include: "the growing tendency towards restricted funding"; "science driven research, TAC driven research, donor driven research"; "donor
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organization constituencies”; “upstream, downstream and mid-stream activities”; “mandate driven activities”; “Center/NARS collaborating mechanisms”; “path-breaking research”; “generation of intermediate products and technology”.

There is much apparent diversity in the subjects presented in the list of donors’ and centers’ concerns. The major issue, however, is the lack or inadequacy of exchange of communications between the two parties, so that a common understanding can be achieved on most of these areas of concern.

Perhaps as is suggested by one co-respondent, the relationships between the CG centers and the NARS remain at the core of this strategic debate on communications. If indeed some donors are placing a high priority on the needs of NARS in formulating their resource allocation policies, then the scope for the dialogue should be expanded to include NARS. The format adopted in the most recent SPAAR meetings will facilitate this three-way dialogue.

Some co-respondents have suggested that donors and centers could select issues among those listed above which require immediate attention, and prepare a 1-2 page brief on the subject. This will perhaps address the growing need for a large number of short “communication briefs” on a wide range of topics, rather than the few elaborate detailed reports, annual, biannual and otherwise which do not receive the attention envisaged. It will be useful for donors to comment on the widely-held belief, that their staff could hardly find the time to read documents more than two pages long.

Clearly, there are many practical problems in attempting to operationalize an informal but effective system of communications. For example, if the categorization of donors into “Stabilizers”, “Innovators”, etc. is considered valid, it would require that communication briefs as described above be tailored to meet the needs of these different categories. An attempt to hit all donor targets with generalities in a single communication, with the attendant lack of information on anything specific makes the product (reports, briefs, etc.) “underwhelming”. Centers are judged to be at their best doing good research and training. These are highly specific and rigorous activities; when centers attempt to describe and explain these activities in reports and briefs, valuable content is lost because (1) they are translated into lay language; (2) they are targeted at a diversity of clients.

Inadequate manpower to effectively deal with specific center issues is a major problem for small donor agencies. Several donor representatives have suggested that perhaps small donors may wish to concentrate their attention and contributions to only a few centers, perhaps two or three. Thus, this would facilitate active, meaningful and in-depth interaction with these few centers. This, however, may not be a new idea, and perhaps not very realistic. It will be useful to have some more dialogue on this topic, given the trend towards donor specialization based on center mandates.

Perhaps a series of briefs from key donors on their “Current multilateral/bilateral funding policies” for a specific geographic area or region would be most welcome to Center Directors. Recent World Bank and USAID support for the development of “Framework for Action” (FFA) in agricultural research in SADCC countries and the Sahel is a good example of a shift in policy or an emerging trend.

Similarly, donors have indicated that they will welcome a 1-2 page brief on a particular aspect within a Center’s mandate. One would expect that a topical issue requiring briefs from centers could be “New mechanisms for the integration of center/NARS research activities”.

It has also been suggested that perhaps a one page questionnaire seeking ideas as to the range of topics on which the donors require briefing would be useful. Donors and centers may want to begin by jointly selecting the most appropriate topics. These “briefs” may be part of targeted information to selected donors in advance of Mid-Term and ICW meetings.

It is the wish and expectation of the Center Directors that distribution and discussion of this strategic paper should signal the beginning of a process. It is hoped that this process will serve to identify more efficient mechanisms for improving the quality of communications between donors and centers within the CGIAR.
Sources of Information

Personal Communications from the following Co-respondents

1. Brian Belcher, IDRC, Canada.
2. Bo Bengtsson, SAREC, Sweden.
3. Andrew Bennett, ODA, U.K.
4. Ernest Corea, CG, Secretariat.
5. Pierre Dubreuil, CIRAD, France.
6. Curt Farrar, c/o IFPRI.
7. Louise Fresco, Wageningen Ag. Univ.
9. Martha ter Kuile, CIDA, Canada.
10. Klaus Winkel, DANIDA, Denmark.

Publications

1. An Act of Faith - Research Helps Feed the Hungry.
   ACIAR and AIDAB in collaboration with CGIAR, Canberra, Australia, 1989.


4. Science and Food, the CGIAR and its Partners.

5. Sustainable Institutions for African Agricultural Development.