

Executive Summary

This synthesis report provides the outcomes of a workshop on Strategic Planning and Priority Setting in the CGIAR. The Workshop for research managers and planners was held over three days under the auspices of the CDDC of the CGIAR at WorldFish Center in Penang, Malaysia in May 2002. Participants representing eleven CGIAR Centers took part in the Workshop, and fourteen Centers provided background information on priority setting processes through the provision of completed questionnaires and related publications.

The Workshop considered the changing research and development environments in which the CGIAR Centers operate and identified the major objectives for undertaking research priority setting and strategic planning processes. Strategic planning was defined to include “visioning” and planning for regional and natural resource/commodity research and higher-level programs, whereas the Center Medium Term Plans (and annual operational plans) were considered aspects of operational planning.

The participants reviewed and analyzed the collective experiences of Centers in priority setting (which revealed a rather large array of approaches nevertheless geared to generally similar goals). For the analysis and conceptualization of the diverse experiences, a methodology called LearningWheel®, developed by Hagmann, was utilized. It is based on the analysis of the success factors in the different experiences, which then provides the basis for defining four major elements or “cornerstones” for managing a successful strategic planning process. These are,

- Firstly, *Process design and management*, which includes identification of the essential elements in a planning process, adoption of appropriate strategies and processes, and possible ways of implementation.
- Secondly, *Understanding the external environment*, which includes analysis of mega trends in key areas of relevance to a Center (e.g. projected demand for a given commodity).
- Thirdly, *Stakeholder involvement*, which includes the effective participation of internal and external stakeholders.
- Fourthly, *Updating and adapting to changes*, which consists of ensuring that the entire process remains flexible in a changing external environment. This is because strategic planning is a continuous process, rather than an event which results in a final document with a fixed lifespan.

The cornerstones help define a framework for strategic and operational planning which was explored in detail by the Workshop, and is provided here in terms of a best practice guide. It is intended that appropriate consideration and application of the framework serve the development of flexible strategic planning in the Centers. Elements of the framework are characterized by examples from the experience of the Centers, so that more and less successful cases can be compared for their efficacy in serving the needs of individual Centers or levels of planning.

To ensure the utility of the recommended framework, it was “ground truthed” by being applied to the cases of two Centers that have undertaken, or will shortly

undertake, strategic planning exercises. The framework was found to be generally useful to senior managers in the development of the components of a thorough strategic planning approach, including research priority setting, thinking through the most appropriate allocation of responsibilities within a Center, and the scheduling of the different elements of the process.

One of the key considerations in the success of a strategic planning process is the ability of the plan, and the consensus generated in the planning process, to help link and lead to implementation of operational projects, to maintain direction in the face of financial and other shocks, and to help recognize the incremental processes that can often lead to distortion of the portfolio and “mission creep”. Whilst the outcomes of the Workshop recognize these factors, so that they can be more explicitly taken into account, the major recommendation is that strategic planning should be undertaken with the express purpose of being immediately linked to operational plans. The utility of cascading or interlinked planning processes, that relate strategic, regional, and benchmark site research activities, for instance, is key in this regard, as are the review and subsequent adaptation steps. The Workshop did not specifically consider the efficiency (costs, benefits, risks) of different operational planning processes and methods, and this is highlighted as an area for further analysis. Certainly Centers that have embarked, at least once, on major quantitative approaches seem best placed subsequently to review and revise both their strategic and operational research portfolios.

The findings of the Workshop are germane not just to the Centers themselves but to many of the component elements of the CGIAR:

The Workshop recommends that **the interim Science Council (iSC)** and the **Systems Office** agree with the Centers on the way that information relevant to strategic planning and priority setting, including global trend analyses (useful subsequently for reviews and impact assessment) can be centralized and made widely available to the Centers.

The **donors and investors** in the CGIAR system will gain from collaboration in, and support for, Center strategic planning processes through the development of agreed priority research plans for regions, commodities, or natural resource systems of interest. However, more quantitative approaches are data intensive and costly. Development of background data and methods to inform priority setting should be recognized as project activities of the Centers and supported, as declining core budgets do not leave Centers the flexibility to conduct such “planning research” or pilot studies.

It is suggested that the **External Program and Management Review Panels** may benefit from this analysis which supplies both a framework, and the realistic capacity that is required for Centers to undertake various types of priority setting processes according to their levels of support. It may therefore help to provide a common understanding and expectation of Centers in relation to priority setting.

Challenge Programs potentially provide a number of new opportunities for the CGIAR Centers, but there is concern about planning for these new initiatives at the system,

consortium and Center levels. On the one hand they can be considered as additions to an operational portfolio of a Center; on the other, the relationship between Centers and a global group of partners in a single program requires investment in extra planning, as well as planning skills (including for instance, negotiation, and business-plan development) on a generally larger scale than the Centers have addressed before. The participants to the Workshop urge that clear and transparent strategic planning processes be applied to programmatic developments at the system level to avoid the piecemeal selection of Challenge Programs which may, in sum, be less than the current aggregation of Center-led and System-wide activities.

A major, if perhaps less tangible, outcome of the Workshop is the beginnings of a **collegial community of practice amongst the research managers and planners of the Centers**. This is key to developing broadly applicable, flexible processes and methods of use to support the CGIAR change process.