

1. Background

The changing CGIAR – Setting priorities for research is challenging at the best of times, but it is evident that the issues confronting the CGIAR system today are several degrees more complicated than in the CGIAR of the past. The idea of centers of agricultural research excellence, their situation in developing countries and the focus on breeding approaches to the improvement of the staple food commodities of developing countries, were all strategic choices, brilliantly realized. This was accomplished by a single-minded, but long term focus and relatively stable core funding for the early Centers. Now, in the evolution of the CGIAR, the publicly-funded, component Centers of the system are being asked to continue to conduct research to meet the pressing food security needs in the world today, but also to perform a set of integrated, development-related functions. The budgets of the individual Centers today are largely stationary or falling, with reducing influence of core or fungible resources within the applicable totals.

Agricultural research, or research for development? – Charged only with a research mandate, institutes apply the logic of research to priority setting i.e. the definition of problems, ideas for their solution and the generation of research projects to test the methods and to improve materials. Research on germplasm enhancement for improved productivity arose from this thinking. In the past, the CGIAR Centers enjoyed a more linear relationship with National Agricultural Research Services (NARS) in the research and dissemination functions. Now, with mandates changed explicitly or implicitly to providing research for development and the alleviation of poverty, there must be a conscious adoption of development logic. This is different, focused on people-centered outcomes, encompassing not only productivity but also environmental concerns and resource sustainability, situational analysis, poverty alleviation, enhancing institutes, delivery systems and policy. Many actors are needed to contribute to the several products. The Centers are now confronted by defining “What is the path to an optimal product?” It is now necessary to distil what the development issues and the related individual research questions are in several fields and how they are balanced, and research scheduled. Development outcomes will not be met by single commodity approaches, or by single agencies,

and the modern CGIAR acknowledges the complexity in partnership arrangements for research and for delivery.

Impact orientation – With a large percentage of the funds which support the activities of the CGIAR Centers coming from the development budget, there is a need for the Centers to demonstrate the impact of their research (in development terms). This leads the Centers to greater involvement in downstream partnerships, and to the commissioning of scientific inputs from upstream providers. Just as the strategic issue requires planning for outputs to which multiple actors are asked to play contributory roles, so success also depends upon a convincing strategy and the means (and funds) to mobilize those actors.

Multiple objectives for outputs; temporal trends in support – The existence of multiple development objectives is further confounded by the fact that the system as a whole, and each Center individually, is funded by consortia of independent donors. There is an inevitable wish by the Centers, as research providers, to join with the donors as partners in development; but the several donors are not unified in outlook, regional interests or funding capacity. The donors are subject to their own national structures and political realities that can interrupt, redirect or temporally constrain funding to agriculture and development issues. From the standpoint of the implementation of Center plans, vogues in donor support can lead to distortion of the intended portfolio and to mission creep. From the Center standpoint, there are perceived trends to move from the support of the Center-led research projects, to the contracting of the Center’s analytical and project management expertise in developing countries to enhance donor activities or goals. As the core budget goes down, or is increasingly earmarked for certain activities, there is the tendency of Centers to seek research agency, Foundation and private sector support to cover the research activities. These new opportunities can bring new constraints on flexibility, and complexity to the path of technology delivery.

Challenges in Strategic and Operational Planning – Diminishing core resources and the “projectisation” of

research, lead to a more piecemeal approach to the overall research requirement according to which piece of the jigsaw can be funded. With fewer uncommitted resources in Centers' budget mosaic, there are associated effects on the reduction in flexibility for planning, project development and the conduct of pilot studies. The requirements of the Strategic Plan for a Center under these circumstances are therefore to establish boundaries, and to provide guidelines to lower level planning horizons when confronted with new opportunities, shocks and demands. For instance, a concerted research agenda to tackle the immediate aspects of poverty (with impact derived from agricultural research) must take into account globalization, trade and economic growth, but not necessarily climate change as a proximal driving issue. However, CGIAR Centers are being asked to address wider and wider concerns with implications for mission creep, short term/long term trade-offs, overload and appropriate staffing. The advent of a more programmatic approach within the CGIAR, particularly the trial of the Challenge Program concept, brings additional considerations at two planning levels; namely the inclusion of Challenge Program activities within operational planning and secondly, the need for the CGIAR system in general to plan for a comprehensive portfolio of new programs.

Roles and partners – As discussed, the Centers have gone from lone providers of commodity research to one of many actors in the research-for-development chain. As well as conducting research for the benefit of many nations simultaneously, the outputs of international public goods research include synthesized knowledge, coordination, analysis and capacity building for individuals, sectors and institutes for each to play their roles more efficiently. The changing research strength of NARS the sources of new science and the complexity of delivery partnerships, including civil society, makes placement of the CGIAR effort increasingly difficult but important. Raising the game to the level of provision of support for international conventions means that Center and system planning must encompass the potential contributions of multinational agencies down to the local partners in delivery. Planning for the present, and for the evolution of change in the system and its environment, requires comprehensive knowledge of the institutional components and trends in the external environment and the adoption of flexible planning processes.

The changes described need to be reflected in the planning processes and methodologies used for strategic planning in the CGIAR in the future.