

CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Interim SCIENCE COUNCIL

**Identifying Challenge Programmes that
Enhance and Broaden Support
for the CGIAR Research Agenda**

Interim SCIENCE COUNCIL SECRETARIAT

FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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1. Background

Recently, members of the ExCo and other stakeholders have expressed concern about the incremental approach being used by the CGIAR in selecting Challenge Programmes (CPs) and the impact this will have on the CGIAR Research Agenda. The need for a more systematic approach to identifying CPs in the context of the overall CGIAR vision and strategy has been emphasized (ExCo III Draft Minutes, Sept. 2002). This note summarizes the interim Science Council's view of how CPs that complement and enhance the existing CGIAR research portfolio, and broaden support for it, may be identified.

2. Challenge Programmes in the CGIAR

At AGM'01 the CGIAR Group adopted the "challenge programme" concept as a major pillar of change in the CGIAR reform process. With this programmatic approach, part of the CGIAR's research effort will now be focused on large multi-institutional research programmes addressing specific problem areas of regional or global significance using expertise and competence of existing Centre programmes and expanded research and development partnerships. These will complement, not replace, existing Centre core and Systemwide programmes. CPs are expected to strengthen and improve the relevance and impact of CGIAR activities, sharpen internal efficiency and generate new longer-term financing.

Reflecting back on the original motivation for establishing the CPs, the rationale behind adopting large, multi-partner research programmes was based on the need for the CGIAR to 'elevate the game'. More specifically, it was envisioned that CPs would:

- Provide increased visibility to the CGIAR by taking on challenges of global significance;
- Cultivate new types of partnerships, particularly between research and development;
- Enhance cost effectiveness and create new synergies between CGIAR Centres and other partners; and
- Attract new sources of funding, including from non-traditional donors.

This last point, the ability to attract new donors or to leverage in new sources of funding was clearly behind much of the support for adopting the CP approach¹.

* Draft Working Document offered by the interim Science Council to facilitate the discussion of the CP process for Ex Co and the new Science Council.

¹ The Group also defined other characteristics of the CPs. Specifically, they would: deliver tangible outputs within a defined period which contribute to the CGIAR's ultimate goals; be grounded in but go beyond the core competencies of the CGIAR Centres; combine bottom-up participatory planning with global strategic analysis of problems and opportunities; and, be developed on an evolutionary basis through learning from experience.

Presently, the Group is about to consider launching two major CPs under the pilot process, one on Water and Food and the other on Biofortification, with a third (Genetic Resources) under further review. Several other pre-proposal CPs are being assessed by the iSC in the regular process. It is conceivable that after two rounds of CP selection there would be anywhere from 3 to 5 CPs, which require significant new funding.

3. CPs in the Context of the CGIAR Vision, Strategy and Agenda

In October 2000, the CGIAR adopted a new vision, goal and mission statement (TAC, 2000). This new vision and strategy for dealing with rural and urban poverty proposes a two-pronged approach in support of technology and policy research on agriculture, forestry and fisheries and natural resources: (a) addressing the needs of the poor in the more favoured environments to ensure food security and prevent future poverty while, at the same time, (b) tackling the more complex problems of poverty in the marginal and difficult areas. A future integrated strategy for the CGIAR was defined based on the following seven planks:

- Reaffirming a people and poverty focus
- Mobilizing new developments in science for difficult-to-address causes of poverty
- Giving highest priority to sub Saharan Africa and South Asia
- Adopting a regional approach to research planning and implementation
- Increased emphasis to new types of partners and partnerships
- Adopting a task force approach to addressing major clearly identifiable problems
- Strengthening the role of the CGIAR as a catalyst, integrator and disseminator of knowledge.

With these seven planks providing the overall strategic framework, the future CGIAR research agenda was defined in the context of five major logframe outputs targeting CGIAR goals². Developed in the light of the perceived challenges ahead, the proposed new research agenda identifies both current and future broad priority areas—for which continuing and additional support would be required. In addition, several of the strategic planks made clear the need for new mechanisms and modes of operation in order to effectively and efficiently move this agenda forward, e.g., new task forces, partnerships, and roles for the CGIAR.

Typically, CGIAR Centres carry out their research and research related activities through two programmatic modes, i.e., through Centre core programmes including Centre-based networks and consortia projects, and through Systemwide programme activities³. One of the key elements of the recent reform process in the CGIAR was the introduction of a third approach called Challenge Programmes to complement and build on these existing programmatic approaches in order to more effectively meet the challenges ahead. Thus, the CGIAR expects its output-driven Research Agenda to be implemented through a programmatic continuum ranging from Centre core programmes at one extreme to ‘Challenge Programmes’ at the other.

² These five output groups are: germplasm collection, characterization and conservation; germplasm improvement; sustainable production systems through integrated NRM; socio-economic and policy research; and, enhancing institutions.

³ It is recognized that much of the Centres’ core work involves considerable collaboration with sister CGIAR Centres and a range of other partners.

There is concern among some donors and other stakeholders of the CGIAR that the implications of adopting the CP approach have not been spelled out sufficiently, especially with respect to their impact on Centre core programmes and Systemwide programmes. Without the stipulation that only CPs that are able to attract significant new sources of funding would be endorsed, critical on-going CGIAR activities could suffer. Indeed, there is a real risk that by reallocating funds currently committed to the Centres to CPs, we may end up with Centres ‘elevating their game’ but increasingly losing programmatic cohesion and neglecting their unique contribution to the world’s welfare (e.g., germplasm collection, conservation, utilization and related knowledge in sustainable production systems). It is particularly critical now, as new CPs will soon be established—and with consideration being given for establishing others—that the CGIAR should closely monitor its overall research programme (Core + System-wide + CP research activities) in the context of what it regards as its optimal agenda.

There is an argument to be made for being both strategic and opportunistic in seeking novel sources of additional funding and new partners to address some of the major global challenges in agriculture, forestry and fisheries. Nevertheless, the Group must be vigilant in ensuring that its heartland agenda and research capacity remain protected ground. The implication here is that, from a strategic point of view, preference need be given to CP themes that address the broad priority areas as defined in the CGIAR’s new vision and strategy.

4. CP Assessment Process and Rationale

After AGM’01 the implementation of CPs proceeded through two rounds of: (i) fast-tracking the first CPs in a pilot process based on ten Group-endorsed CP pre-proposals and (ii) initiating the regular process involving a three-step selection procedure: Concept note - Pre-proposal - Full-proposal. The TAC/interim Science Council (iSC) was charged with the responsibility of assessing proposals at each step and recommending to the Group selected ones for further development.

For the accelerated *pilot process*, the iSC applied an evaluation procedure based on the 11 criteria approved by the CGIAR which were subsequently reformatted into four namely: (1) relevance (2) science quality; (3) partnerships; and, (4) funding prospects. Higher relative weights were given to the first two main criteria. Supplemented by a peer review system using a wide range of external experts, the iSC adopted a modified Delphi approach involving all iSC members to identify a ranked list of CP pre-proposals and ultimately, to recommend no more than three full proposals to the Group as requested.

One of the major lessons emerging from the iSC’s review of proposals in the pilot process, was the recognition of the incongruity between the need for clarity and specificity of research objectives, methodologies and deliverables on one hand and the imperative of comprehensiveness and inclusivity to attract new donor support and promote expanded stakeholder ownership, on the other.

The iSC realized that it cannot reasonably expect the proponents to come forward with detailed work programmes until they have consulted widely with relevant partners and stakeholders. Thus, the substantive science quality standards could only be applied at the full proposal stage, or as in the case of the Water CP, a year after the CP is launched. In the meantime, the iSC must rely on the relevance of the problem set, the scientific reasonableness

and logic of the CP approach and framework, the qualifications of the proponents and the assurance of science quality control inherent in the proposed competitive grant schemes.

The *regular process* was launched by a call for concept notes in late 2001. The iSC assessed a total of 41 initiatives early in 2002, including 35 new concept notes and six concept notes carried over from the pilot process, using an evaluation process that took into account the three broad criteria established by the Group at AGM '01⁴. Thirteen CP concept notes were recommended by the iSC for further (pre-proposal) development. As already alluded to, it became apparent that even at the pre-proposal stage, it was unrealistic to expect details of scientific methods, workplans and specific timeframes for outputs that would allow differentiation between CPs by scientific quality. Furthermore, the iSC realized that emphasis on quality of science unnecessarily creates a bias against conventional but high impact research vis-à-vis the more basic, speculative approaches. For these reasons, the iSC chose to evaluate the regular process CP pre-proposals in distinct categories using as guiding principles: (a) the compelling rationales behind the CP concept; (b) congruence with the CGIAR's new Vision and Strategy, especially the strategic planks and logframe outputs; (c) the current analytical framework for setting research priorities in the CGIAR; and (d) quality of the research proposal. This will no doubt be modified in the future in the light of further considerations and lessons learnt.

These led the iSC to adopt a two-tiered system of evaluation of CP pre-proposals in the regular process. This is a significant departure from the weighted, ranking scheme used in the evaluation of the ten CP pre-proposals of the pilot process, wherein pre-proposals were given scores for each of four weighted criteria discussed above and the sums derived formed the basis for selection.

Essentially, the new approach recognizes a hierarchy (order) of considerations. First-order considerations are based on the original purpose or motivation behind establishing CPs, i.e., providing increased visibility to the CGIAR by addressing global challenges with a wider range of partners, and, attracting new sources of funding to support CGIAR activities. However, these are necessary but not sufficient conditions for endorsement. Second-order considerations cover two other key aspects: (a) how the CP influences the CGIAR portfolio balance (i.e., relative priority) and (b) specific programme-quality considerations. This hierarchy of considerations is elaborated below:

First order considerations: Strongly adheres to the dominant, original motivations for adopting the CP approach [*i.e., must pass this test before being given any further consideration*]

- Develops new types of partnerships, particularly between research and development, and attracts new sources of funding outside the traditional donors.
- Provides increased visibility to the CGIAR by taking on global or regional challenges, particularly global conventions.

Second order considerations: sufficient conditions and other compelling reasons

⁴ These are: (i) addresses an issue of overwhelming significance; (ii) fits within the CGIAR mission and goals; and, (iii) is likely to generate significant outputs and impact.

A. Influence on CGIAR priorities and strategies

- Effectively addresses one or more of the seven planks in the Strategy, especially the following four:
 - Focuses on a priority region, e.g., Africa; South Asia;
 - Promotes a regional approach to research planning and implementation⁵;
 - Mobilizes new developments in science;
 - Strengthens the role of the CGIAR as catalyst, integrator and disseminator of knowledge.
- Addresses a relatively underfunded area of research in the CGIAR portfolio, i.e., an undersubscribed sector, commodity or undertaking/output. The judgement as to whether an area is underfunded is a qualitative one, based on iSC interpretation of documentation, input from stakeholders, etc.

B. Programme quality considerations

- Quality and relevance of the science assured
 - research objectives and hypotheses clearly specified;
 - is time-bound and focused on a few well-defined deliverables;
 - clearly defined mechanisms for delivery and dissemination of research outputs;
- Capitalizes/builds on the core competence and comparative advantage of the CGIAR and its partners;
- Enhances cost effectiveness and creates new synergies between CGIAR Centres and other partners;
- Proponents are the best qualified in terms of research expertise and prior research achievements and are partnered with institutions/organizations with top credentials;
- High potential impact and global public goods oriented.

The iSC believes that by following this systematic approach for bringing a few selected CPs into the CGIAR agenda, an approach that is anchored in the original motivation for the adopting the CP approach and guided by and consistent with the CGIAR's new vision and strategy, one can be confident that the CPs selected do indeed complement and enhance the existing CGIAR research agenda. This is an area deserving much greater attention, particularly as CPs become increasingly important over time.

5. CP Process in the Future

The CP process to date has unleashed a wealth of ideas and energy and introduced prospective innovative partnerships and governance mechanisms into the CGIAR System. The process is generating much goodwill and is opening up potential new sources of funding. Even at this early stage, the iSC is very much encouraged that the objectives for which the CPs are being launched will be achieved.

⁵ The regional approach is particularly important where comprehensive development efforts are needed for agricultural innovations to have an impact on poverty, e.g., in sub-Saharan Africa. This new approach must be participatory, bringing in local, regional and global knowledge to bear in a combined way on the problems of the poor, and to elicit ownership and commitment from among the various partners and stakeholders.

At the same time, the iSC recognizes the immense effort spent and resources invested by the Boards, management and staff of the CGIAR Centres in collaboration with their partners during the proposal development process. This process has certainly raised CGIAR Centres' expectations. However, as the System is not able to accommodate more than a handful of CPs at this time, most of these expectations are unlikely to be fulfilled, in terms of concept notes, pre-proposals, and full proposals being successfully elevated to CP status in the CGIAR agenda. Furthermore, the iSC is aware of the inherent opportunity costs of the CP process in terms of scarce resources and scientific talent diverted from critical on-going activities at the Centres—notwithstanding the positive elements of the process as noted previously.

Moreover, it is expected that as the number of CPs increase, they will form a significant part in the CGIAR's overall agenda. Should the CPs constitute anywhere from 25% to 50% of the total CGIAR investment as originally indicated, their thematic complements could materially redirect priorities and alter System strategy⁷.

The CP business plans propose innovative financing modalities and management structures which would undoubtedly introduce complexity into the System's basic autonomous international Centre model as well as the System governance. Also, there are significant areas of overlap across CPs. These need time to be sorted out.

The iSC therefore recommends that the pace of introduction of CPs be moderated to allow time for the System to reflect on the programmatic consequences as well as on the management and governance implications of CP. The iSC believes that the System could prudently absorb no more than five CPs between now and 2004 and has shaped its recommendations accordingly.

With its endorsement of one candidate CP from the regular process (FARA pre-proposal on SSA), this brings to a total of four (3 + 1), the number of CPs which the iSC has recommended to full proposal preparation. However, there are several other incipient CP pre-proposals in the pipeline which iSC considers of potentially high merit. They have generated considerable enthusiasm and goodwill among the Centres and their partners and created new and interesting alliances and funding prospects. It would be unfortunate if their enthusiasm is dulled and their momentum stalled at this time.

In particular, the iSC identified four CP pre-proposals in the regular process (climate change, coast zones, rainforests and desertification) which it considers highly meritorious but not yet ready for full proposal endorsement, and which the iSC believes could benefit from further refinement. They have clear relevance and potential to contribute to the goals of the CGIAR and are led by proponents with eminent qualifications to deliver good science and impact.

The iSC therefore recommends that the proponents of these candidate CPs be encouraged to develop these initiatives further.

⁷ The proposed Water and Food CP almost doubles the share of investment going to the water sector from 4.7% of total investment to almost 9% assuming all activities within this CP are classified under the water sector. This is against a recommended level of 3% for the System. This argues for a more formal and transparent redefinition of System priorities and indicative resource allocation targets.

One option could be a temporary portfolio of small grants to these candidate CPs over a limited period to allow the proponents additional time and resources to (a) further clarify their research objectives, methodologies and deliverables; (b) implement key enabling research which will solidify the proof-of-concept; (c) strengthen their partnerships; and (d) firm up donor and stakeholder support. The proponents could be asked to submit a work plan on what they hope to achieve in the intervening period to move the CP planning process forward. Should any of the CPs receive actual or firm pledges of major donor and partner support exceeding an agreed threshold, the status of the pre-proposals could be reviewed by the SC/ExCo.

7. Context and Basis for Future CP Selection

Implementation of the recommended and approved CPs, and addition of new CPs need to be considered in the context of (a) their thematic content and substance in the context of the overall priorities, strategy and role of the CGIAR as it moves into the future, and (b) the proper balance among CGIAR operating modes, including Centre core programmes, Systemwide programmes (SWPs) and CPs. Appropriate roles and boundary conditions need to be developed for each category. In its evaluation of the regular process pre-proposals, the iSC has paid close attention to whether CPs relate to priority System goals and whether some of the proposals would be better pursued as SWPs or retained as Centre core activities⁸

In an ideal world, the System should have clearly defined resource envelop, priorities and associated recommended levels of resource allocation for each priority against which to evaluate individual Centre core programmes, SWPs and CPs, their respective MTPs and annual investment plans. Within that context it would be possible for the CGIAR to specify more confidently the appropriate size, scope and number of CPs that the System can effectively absorb over the next 5-10 years, without sacrificing its heartland agenda, capacity and comparative advantage. This would then facilitate an internal process for identifying problems, gaps and opportunities in the context of ideas for CPs, SWPs and Centre programmes.

However, it needs to be recognized that, as the CGIAR becomes increasingly diversified into activities such as NRM, water, policy and institutions, it also becomes more difficult to engage in quantitatively based priority setting and in developing an “optimal” resource allocation based on such priorities.

⁸ The iSC has identified a number of conditions under which it feels certain themes and associated programme proposals are better suited as CPs. CPs are more appropriate if they:

- Are able to attract significantly greater attention and resources from the international donors than otherwise as a SWP or core programme of a single Centre;
- Capture considerable economies of scale by virtue of its size and scope—and these have been defined and justified accordingly (e.g., Water and Food CP);
- Focus on a few well defined deliverables (vs. SWPs which may have a stronger focus on and need for overall coordination and cooperation on the broad topic of concern);
- Have broader participation of NARS, CGIAR Centres and other relevant stakeholders;
- Have clear added-value over a comparable SWP when organized as a CP for reasons clearly specified. (Note: The need to make SWPs more efficient and effective is NOT sufficient justification for raising a SWP to CP status;
- Are not a substitute for the primary research business of the Centre.

At present, the System is in transition and is aiming to expand its funding base and is moving forward on an unknown open-ended resource envelop which can make planning and decision-making difficult. CPs are a central part of the System strategy to expand the funding base for the CGIAR agenda. One possible approach to facilitate decision-making would be to: (a) set a planning resource envelope of say \$500 million (up from \$360 million current); and (b) use the 1997 Group-endorsed indicative System level resource allocation norms, modified by the changes in focus, emphasis and mode of operation resulting from the new CGIAR Vision and Strategy.

Looking ahead, one of the key tasks facing the new Science Council will be to build upon the TAC's strategic assessments and planning exercises to ensure the System's continuing relevance and comparative advantage and to articulate a clear set of priorities and strategic directions that complement the efforts of other organizations. Such a dynamic and ongoing priority-setting effort along side the introduction and establishment of CPs would be characterised by strong complementarities with the CP process itself, as partnerships with other institutions would be reinforced and expanded upon, so as to derive broad-based information and criteria for use in regional and global priority setting. Ultimately, this would provide critical guidance for System-level decision making, not only in the context of CPs, but in broader terms of how a significantly higher level of investment anticipated by the CGIAR can be optimally allocated—in programmatic, institutional and organizational terms—towards achieving the defined goals and mission of the CGIAR.

The CP process needs to move ahead proactively to incorporate key global and regional challenges that best can be addressed by the CGIAR and a wide set of partners through mechanisms such as the CPs. At the same time, the CGIAR needs to move at a pace that allows it make decisions on future CPs based on (a) what it learns from experience in implementing current CPs and (b) how such future CPs best can fit within the overall set of priorities and strategies for moving the overall CGIAR agenda ahead in an effective and efficient manner.