

CONSULTATIVE GROUP ON INTERNATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

SCIENCE COUNCIL

**Center and Challenge Program Medium Term Plans
2006–2008**

Overview of the SC Commentary

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Dr Ian Johnson
CGIAR Chairman
1776 G Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20006, USA

Dear Ian,

I am pleased to submit to you the Science Council's Commentary on the Centers' and Challenge Programs' 2006-08 Medium Term Plans (MTPs).

This year the same procedure was followed as last year. Centers and Challenge Programs were invited to prepare a response to the SC Commentary, which is inserted in the attached document.

I wish to thank all Science Council members for undertaking this challenging task in such a short time and the SC Secretariat for assisting in the process.

I look forward to discussing the Report with ExCo members at its next meeting.

Yours sincerely,

Per Pinstrup-Andersen
Chair, Science Council

Overview of the MTPs

The Medium Term Plans (MTPs) for 2006-2008 provide a very comprehensive account of the CGIAR's research agenda. The Centers, Systemwide and Ecoregional Programs (SWEPS) and the three established Challenge Programs (CPs) are making and planning to make major contributions to the achievement of the CGIAR goals as embodied in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This year the MTPs are much improved from previous ones in the clarity of planning at both Center and Project level. There is scope for improvement so that the MTPs can be used effectively as a basis for monitoring and performance measurement (PM). This document provides the Science Council's (SC) commentary on each of the MTPs. The SC also draws attention to a few general trends and issues observed across the Plans. Specifically, the SC considers that:

- Many of the activities proposed are unlikely to result in international public goods (IPGs);
- Too much effort is being spent on development activities of a local or national nature with little or no research content. The CGIAR runs the risk of becoming a high-level consulting firm or a development agency. It is not well suited for either role.
- A better specification of the pathways from outputs to impact is needed.
- Better and more clearly defined output targets are needed if the MTPs are to be used for PM purposes. Only about half of the output targets are suitable for monitoring and verifying achievements.
- More interaction is needed across Centers on several activities undertaken by them, such as research on innovation systems, delivery systems and integrated natural resource management (INRM) at the landscape level. The SC hopes that the Alliance Executive will facilitate such interaction.
- More explicit elaboration is needed of the role of the Center relative to its partners.

International public goods (IPGs). Many of the activities planned in the MTPs appear to be designed for only local application with no indication of how results will contribute to knowledge and technology that can be extrapolated to other locations. The SC is seeking to understand why this is. One reason is the high level of development activities relevant usually only at a local level. The other is that the potential contribution of locally-focused research to IPGs is explicit neither in the MTP Project narrative nor in the logframe description of the outputs and output targets. The SC identified some cross country links between outputs but they were not specified in the MTP. For instance, a specific output target for one year is often not placed into the context of a multiple site analysis. The overall output generated at a number of sites is likely to be more robust for extrapolation and use by others, thus constituting a valid IPG. The context of the research needs to be better elaborated in the MTP program rationale to give evidence of research geared to provide the IPG.

There is also a need to clarify the definition and concept of an IPG, moving beyond simply whether research results are adopted in one or more countries. Critical here is

how, and to what extent, research and its planned outputs address problems of widespread and pervasive (international) importance; research for which the national programs individually do not have sufficient incentives. The concept of research and recommendation domains is highly pertinent. The SC is developing a conceptual note on the CGIAR's niche in the research-development continuum, including a clearer definition of an IPG deriving from agricultural research and how this might be operationalised for planning and priority assessment.

Development vs. research. Closely related to the previous point, it is obvious that Centers, to a varying extent, are engaged in development activities that involve little or no research. These include: local technology demonstrations; seed multiplication and vegetative propagation; facilitation of local organisations and enterprises; development of local support systems; direct extension, training at farmer, youth and village level; preparation of extension materials; and post-conflict rehabilitation activities. It is doubtful this is a prudent use of resources in the CGIAR whose comparative advantage is IPG research. Time spent by Centers using their resources on development activities - which are characteristically of a local nature - results in lost opportunities in research aimed at solving problems of widespread importance.

The SC understands some of the driving forces to undertake development activities, including relief aid. One imperative is the investors' need for impact and the Centers' need for additional income - which, fortunately, in some cases spills over to support research activities via the overhead cost charges made by the Centers. Another force is the Centers' desire to show impact directly on the poor. The result, however, is the inevitable tendency for Centers to use their research infrastructure to support development work, thereby shifting resources and attention away from focused IPG research. There is also a risk that Centers substitute and "crowd out" national organisations. As long as CGIAR Centers fill 'critical development needs', alternative suppliers are unlikely to emerge. Centres should actively promote the role of their partners and advocate for the investment by others in the delivery systems.

There also exist fundamental intractable constraints rendering impacts from successful research unattainable. An example, relevant in many parts of SSA, is the lack of any formal seed delivery system in which improved seed can reach farm households. This has led to some Centers engaging in local seed delivery activities for their crop of interest. The tendency is to fill gaps left by weak NARS and non-existent infrastructure. The SC perceives a real need for interaction among Centers on institutional learning of a generalizable nature about delivery systems.

Impact pathways. Centers need to understand and describe the impact pathway clearly and measure their success by the outputs, outcomes and intermediate impacts along that pathway. This establishes the link between research outputs, outcomes (where Centres have less control than with outputs) and the impacts at different levels expected from

research. Clear impact pathway analysis also reflects the intended IPG nature of the research. The SC is encouraged that a number of Centres are using and developing this concept in their MTPs.

As alluded to above, Centres desire to show direct impact on the poor. The SC encourages the Centres to demonstrate ultimate impacts to the poor recognising that the Centres have very limited control over those impacts and at the same time cautioning the Centres against focusing their efforts in development activities or only on short-term impacts.

Improving logframes for PM. The quality of the logframes, while considerably improved from last year's, still remains variable - particularly in the description of outputs and output targets that are clear, measurable and verifiable and that will make a difference. Only about half of the output targets are suitable for monitoring achievement and thereby measuring performance. The problems observed with the output targets include: lack of specificity (e.g. of targets crops, traits, locations and agroecologies); lack of quantification (e.g. of materials, methods, tools and protocols to be developed and in capacity targets); confusion of outcomes and impacts with outputs; description of activities, such as events, as outputs; description of research process or management steps as outputs; listing of minor internal project milestones as outputs. There is need for fewer output targets with sufficient magnitude and clarity.

The SC is concerned about this variability and how it affects the ability to clearly measure achievement. The SC has endorsed a PM system, unique to the CGIAR research system, built around measuring the things that matter – real outputs, real outcomes and ability to show impact. Thus, the SC plans to continue to work with the Centers to ensure that the PM system accurately reflects results. The SC also encourages Centers to define clear time frames for achieving the outputs.

Interaction in research. The three established CPs, the SWEPs and various alliances are bringing about synergies at the System level. However, there are more opportunities to reduce duplication and enhance impact in areas where several Centres are engaged, such as:

- Research on delivery systems, particularly in Africa.
- Innovation systems as a legitimate research activity in order to understand the pathway for impact and improve the relevance of research and effective interaction amongst key traditional as well as non-traditional research providers.
- Integrated pest management approaches to reduce the injury from striga and aflatoxin - a number of Centers are working separately on these two pests in Africa.
- Research on INRM - many Centers operating in the same agroecological zones engage in a number of INRM activities.

The SC notes that the SWEF partnerships are not always explicitly described in the program MTPs; they are not reflected in each partner's MTPs, and resource allocations are not shown. The SC recommends that each SWEF partner should show the joint outputs in its respective MTP and more clearly specify its role and responsibilities.

Partnerships. Centers present very long lists of partners. However, a common feature of the MTPs is the vagueness in the description of and rationale for such partnerships in relation to the contributions to outputs. The SC is concerned that maintaining a very high number of collaborators results in high transaction costs, and if these partnerships do not have a clear purpose and do not add value to the research, the costs are unjustified. Furthermore, the Centers do not explain their role relative to the partners' contribution in collaborative research. It is clear that many output targets are not possible to achieve without partner involvement and sometimes they seem to be mostly the partners' product. The SC recommends that the MTPs be more explicit regarding collaboration, the major collaborators, and the Center's role relative to that of its partners.

In addition to these issues, the SC observes that several Centers explicitly show the linkage from their research to the proposed System Priorities. Reflecting this, some Centers have started to broaden their commodity mandate and, anticipating a shift to high value crops, have initiated work in this area. However, there are also areas of divergence from what is generally considered the CGIAR's core comparative advantage. One such area is research related to human health. The SC endorses research on constraints to productivity increases caused by problems such as HIV/AIDS and on agricultural practices that have a direct or indirect effect on health. The SC cautions against the CGIAR engaging in research on human health *per se*. The CGIAR does not have the expertise in such work and some Centers may be overstating the potential impacts from work in this area. Another area is research in environmental services. The SC recommends that the CGIAR system focus on those issues of the environment that impinge on the productivity of food, fish and forests and, therefore, on the poor, and not undertake ecosystems services research unrelated to a sustainable increase in agricultural productivity.