

SCIENCE COUNCIL OF THE CGIAR

Commentary on the Sixth External Program and Management Review of the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA)

20 September 2007

The Council considered the Report of the Sixth External Program and Management Review of IITA, and the Center's response, at the Science Council's eighth Meeting at Bioversity International, Maccarese, Italy on the 28th of August 2007. The principle findings and recommendations of the EPMR Panel were presented by the Panel Chair, Dr Cyrus Ndiritu. Responses on behalf of the Center were made by Professor Bryan Harvey, IITA Board Chair and by IITA Director General Hartmann.

Overview

The SC notes that the Panel had treated IITA's paradigm for R4D (Research for Development) as an important experiment, including as it did an increased focus on the production to market chain and value addition. The Panel's major recommendations were therefore for the Center to develop an overall strategy to contribute to R4D and to strengthen the alignment between such a Strategy and the Center's MTP Projects and individual grant projects. In addition there was a strong recommendation for IITA to focus more effectively on the management of its science. The SC is pleased to note that the quality of IITA's science is not considered a constraint at the present time but that additional skills and areas for development have been identified so that IITA can match its project research and services to its ambitions for African agricultural development.

The SC strongly supports the need for IITA to complete the development of a new strategic plan to help describe and ensure the longer term focus for its research and show how it contributes to the System Priorities and to the regional alignment. It also supports the Panel's observation that the drawing together of experiences (the synthesis of results in different areas, and evaluation of long- and short-term science) and a thoughtful approach to partnership development (see below) are important inputs into effective strategic planning. A well focused strategic plan linked directly to a business plan for guiding the financing of the strategy is required in order to maintain focus in the R4D approach. The Science Council therefore will, as part of the follow up process to this EPMR, review and comment on the new draft of IITA's strategic plan as soon as it is available, and before SC09.

In the new plan, the SC expects IITA to lay out its definition of the R4D approach (which may also help the development of a CGIAR-wide definition of this term) and the IPG research within that approach. The approach encompasses research on commodity value addition and agri-business. In this context the Panel advises that IITA's role cannot be to develop and deploy new producer organizations, seed enterprises or agribusiness ventures, but rather to assess which approaches and methods are most effective and to ensure that partners at the national level are able to act on this information. For example, because of the lack of a seed industry in West Africa, there are a number of instances where IITA projects feature community (or other local-level) seed multiplication schemes. Although such schemes may be useful for diffusing new varieties, there is no evidence from IITA that they lead to any sustainable seed production capacity. In addition, the investment in such schemes may dampen incentives for the development of private seed production capacity. It would be appropriate for IITA to address this dilemma in a more organized way, as it seriously affects the capacities for widespread diffusion of its products. A review and synthesis of its experiences in this field would be in order (for instance with other CGIAR Centers in the implementation of System Priorities or the regional plan). The Science Council supports the Panel's advice for IITA to look more at input markets relevant to its own research products rather than involve itself in research on output

markets. The distinction between investing research resources to engage in pilot activities in order to learn lessons from specific experiences, and assuming coordination responsibility for development projects conceived by external donors or national government production campaigns, needs to be made clear in IITA's policy and strategic vision.

Research relevance

The Council is pleased to note that the Panel finds large impacts on cassava production based on IITA's cassava varieties and biocontrol agents, and the Panel commends IITA scientists for communicating these results through a very good publication record. The Panel found that IITA's approaches to crop improvement and plant protection research continue to hold out major opportunities for impact, although in contrast to cassava, there is little published work or impact documented on cowpeas.

The SC agrees with the Panel that research on NRM including soil fertility remains a key issue in Africa and IITA must define its strategy and research in this area in relation to recent developments in fertilizer use such as the Abuja declaration. It would be wise to capitalize on the experiences of IFDC and others in this field. In addition, there is a need to re-energize the plant health related IPM and biocontrol research at IITA. These approaches need to be made explicit in a new IITA strategy.

The SC confirms the Panel's recommendations to strengthen specific areas of science, namely: the consolidation of biotechnology research (to maximise IITA's contributions to this important area of crop improvement research), the need for business plans and the involvement of relevant NARS early on in transgenic breeding programs (as highlighted in the Report of the Biosafety Panel to the CGIAR Science Council on Biosafety Policy and Practices of the CGIAR Centers, Published in May 2007), acquiring biometrics expertise, to raise the profile of cryopreservation and support to germplasm health and transfer systems, to document soil fertility research and advocate more efficient use and input supply systems, to reassess the strategic direction of the Opportunities and Threats project and to strengthen the national agri-business consultative platform and ensure risk assessment and management for IITA.

The SC agrees with the panel that donors need more clarity and guidance in the use of performance indicators such as 3a on the quality and extent of impact assessment work in the Centers. However it does not agree that such indicators have "dubious value". The SC also would not agree that the impact indicators have: "...penalized (Centers) inappropriately and diverted (them) from practical, comprehensive studies of adoption and impact" (p.43) and that "...the requirements of journal publication are often inimical to practical adoption analysis as part of an on-going program of research" (p.78). Quality in the conduct of impact assessments is vital if the results from them are to be regarded as credible, rather than public relations exercises.

IPGs and the organization of IITA's science

The SC finds that it would have been useful if the Panel had been more analytical on the pros and cons of IITA organizing research around the commodity value chain versus the ecosystem approach in terms of generating IPG research. Historically, IITA has oscillated between structuring its research on ecoregional or crop-based systems. The most recent change of paradigm by IITA, to a more agri-business centred approach to new research based on demand-pull, and commodity value chains, has led to a decline in the use of benchmark sites, previously a mainstay of IITA strategy on NRM research and means of extrapolating results. Ecosystems are no longer seen by IITA as the prime determinant for technology generation. The SC notes that this change might make it more difficult to ensure that IITA results would be turned into IPGs and would maintain that the two approaches are complements, not substitutes. The commodity value chain approach requires analysis to ensure that international spillovers can be generated and that the benefits of gains beyond the farm gate accrue sufficiently to the poor. It is notable that WARDA is being encouraged by its EPMR Panel to better

target its research activities using a stratification of its biophysical and socioeconomic environments, which at first sight would seem to be the opposite of IITA's move away from an ecosystem approach. Such alternative approaches would not be conducive to improved programmatic alignment among Centers, which is being encouraged by the CGIAR. Thus, the SC encourages IITA to make its expected modus operandi to produce IPGs clear in its strategy document, and points to examples, such as the "outcome line" approach (described in the recent EPMP Report of CIAT), as potentially useful means of structuring such strategic discussions.

Approach to partnerships

IITA has numerous listed and practical partnerships with national programs and the Panel noted that IITA has expanded partnerships to include the private sector, CSO, ARIs, opportunities from NEPAD, FARA, and science partnerships with other CGIAR Centers and the BeCA facility. However, in engaging with new agri-business initiatives the immediate (and local) focus of IITA has switched to relationships with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and universities. The Science Council supports the Panel's perceptive assessment of the possible danger for the Center in its long-term relationships with traditional national partners, with a need to re-assess partnerships in relation to new activities and likely Center impacts. The Panel has encouraged a more active and broader engagement with NARS to maintain the traditional links that the Center had built up and to ensure the sustainability of IITA's research interventions in Africa. Capacity building remains a key point of interaction with NARS partners and a contribution to IITA goals. IITA's choice to reduce its direct involvement in training courses in favour of program-associated training is understandable but may have to be executed with some sensitivity to avoid the feeling of dissociation from the work of IITA expressed by some NARS. The Panel has indicated the need for IITA to engage NARS in all aspects of its agri-business and value addition research to enhance collaboration and mutual learning. The Science Council supports this approach.

Inter-Center interactions

Given the major responsibility that IITA has for cassava in Africa, the continuing disagreement between CIAT and IITA over this commodity is detrimental to the CGIAR and its work. The Science Council understands that the major point of dispute is the entry point and phytosanitary control for improved cassava germplasm into Africa. It is imperative that only certified clean germplasm be imported and that African farmers have the opportunity to benefit from a broad selection of improved germplasm. In agreement with the EPMP Panel reports of both IITA and CIAT, the Science Council urges a swift resolution of this issue. It is encouraged by promises from both Board Chairs that steps are being taken to this end and the Science Council will follow progress closely. On the other hand, the SC was very pleased to see the positive statement about the relationship between IITA and Bioversity and between IITA and CIMMYT for the very long standing partnership on maize research in Africa. Given the broad mandate of IITA and its relative weakness in staple and horticultural crop pest management, IITA would gain from a strategic alliance with AVRDC and ICIPE.

Both the EPMP of IITA, and the simultaneous EPMP Report on WARDA, comment favorably on the steps being taken to align aspects of the corporate services function of the two Centers at the Benin station. WARDA's programmatic linkages are more expressly with Centers having rice research programs (i.e. with IRRI and CIAT as consolidated in a recent agreement). However, the SC notes that both IITA and WARDA EPMP Reports make recommendations for new staff positions (and a Scientific Advisory Panel at WARDA) and this may provide opportunities for the Centers to consider joint appointments or other arrangements (e.g. in the areas of biometrics) to meet the needs of both Centers. Any such arrangements should seek to enhance the role of the IITA staff group and facilities concerned with IPM at the Biocontrol Center for Africa (the Benin station) and not to reduce them.

The SC notes that whilst the Panel records that IITA spent very substantial staff time in contributing

to regional planning since the undertaking was agreed in mid 2004, it does not report on the value-added for research from the alignment, or savings to IITA from the possible devolution of activities. There has been similarly slow progress in the initiation of the SSA-CP at the West African site. IITA has been very successful in initiating full cost recovery as part of its financial growth, and yet overhead issues remain contentious in developing IITA partnership relations with CGIAR and associated partners. The Science Council believes that the Alliance Executive has an opportunity to play a more effective role in mediating and galvanizing some of the latent research relationships in West Africa. Drawn out debates can also lead to the disillusionment of partners contributing to collaborative research and consortia, which IITA must guard against.

Governance-Board processes and financial management

The SC is pleased to note the growth and comparative health of IITA's financial resources over the period of the review, suggesting strong support by key donors for its R4D approach and good financial management. It further notes therefore that the Panel's major recommendations in this area are on improving the management of science and science-support functions. The changing research project structure over the period of the review, the incomplete strategic planning, the long term experimentation with the R4D council (just recently made into an advisory body) may all be seen as having delayed IITA's progress and some of the fault lies in the slow implementation of the recommendations of the 5th EPMR by the Center. This particularly applies to oversight of the program of science. The SC notes that some of the recommendations in terms of science management in this EPMR are similar to those in the previous one. Thus the SC asks that a detailed report on the progress of implementing the current Panel's recommendations should accompany the submission of the MTP in the next two years. The SC expects to follow developments closely, particularly relating to the science leaders (DDG-R and the Deputy Directors), to ensure that all senior positions are filled and to ensure that they have appropriate and feasible responsibilities to allow for the planning and management of IITA science. There is a concomitant need to strengthen the support to research by enhancing the HR unit to become proactive in recruitment, and strengthen the procurement function.

In summary

The SC offers its thanks to the 6th EPMR Panel for its Report. The SC, whilst finding the EPMR Report quite long and somewhat guarded in tone, believes that it is a helpful report for the Center, and for the System, and accepts the Report and its recommendations. The Science Council believes that the development of a new strategic plan by IITA is essential in order to address the Report's recommendations and to articulate better its research plan for the future. The SC looks forward to reviewing and commenting on a cohesive draft IITA strategic plan and design of the future projects as soon as it is available. The SC asks that the R4D paradigm is clearly defined. The role and pursuit of partnerships needs to be developed and the approach to capacity building is an important component for IITA to articulate too. Soil fertility remains a key issue in Africa, and IITA should define its strategy and research in this area, as well as its stance in relation to recent developments in fertilizer use such as the Abuja declaration.

The Council remains concerned about the IITA-CIAT cassava relationship and looks forward to a timetable for resolution of the issue as a matter of importance for the System.

The Council notes the Panel's cautions about possible mis-interpretation by donors of some indicators of the Performance Measurement System, and these will be kept under constant review. The Council urges IITA to take up the recommendations to which it has agreed in a prompt manner. Delays in responding to the 5th EPMR had had an opportunity cost to IITA in terms of strategy development, the priority setting process at program level, and the management of science. Thus the SC asks that specific updates, reporting the steps made towards implementation of the agreed recommendations, be provided as part of the submission of the MTP for the next two years.