

From the Science Council Chair

Public Goods and the CGIAR

Answers to three interrelated questions are of critical importance for the future priorities and activities of the Future Harvest centers. The questions are: What is an “international public good”? Should the Future Harvest centers prioritize the creation of such goods? And, where on the research-development continuum should the CGIAR supported activities be? I will address each of the three in turn.

Public goods have two characteristics. First, the use of the good by one individual does not detract from that of another and second, it is impossible to exclude anybody from using the good. A public good is international, if it is of use across country borders. But across how many borders? That is a matter of judgment. I like to use the word “several”, meaning more than a few. Imprecise? For sure. The SC will lead discussions to further refine the concept.

My answer to the second question is YES. Why? For two reasons. First, research that produces private rather than public goods, i.e. goods that can be protected with exclusive property rights, are likely to be produced by the private sector. Second, research results of use to many countries may not generate enough benefits to any one country to warrant national research. Adding the benefits that several countries can obtain justifies international research. Identifying those areas of research that would remove the largest number of people from poverty but that would not be undertaken by the private sector or publicly funded national systems, is the most important part of setting priorities within the CGIAR.

But what do we do in countries where the publicly funded agricultural research system is absent or in very poor shape? We help strengthen national or regional systems. Capacity strengthening is a legitimate activity of the CGIAR. So is advocacy to get national governments and development assistance agencies to do it. Doing the research for them is usually not. It reduces the incentive for the national government to allocate funds to a national system and it tends to crowd out national researchers, while spending CGIAR money that would be better spent generating research results of use to several countries. Most CGIAR research would best be done in collaboration with national researchers in selected developing countries. It should be useful to the country where it is done, but also to several others. Research planning should identify the pathway from the desired research output through outcome and impact. The pathways should be plausible, not guaranteed.

This brings me to the third question. In my opinion, the Future Harvest centers should prioritize research for development, maintaining close collaboration with advanced research institutions for more basic research and with national and international institutions for adaptation of knowledge and technology from international research as well as delivery systems. Facilitating interaction and delivery through networks has been effective in a number of cases. Placing the CGIAR in the middle of the continuum will, I believe, contribute to the maximization of impact per dollar spent, particularly if we operate within an innovation systems approach, in which each institution is capitalizing on its comparative advantage. But what if there is no delivery system? Then the research results from CGIAR research will rot on the shelf. Rather than giving in to the

temptation to develop delivery systems for particular communities or countries, a temptation that is particularly strong if donors are ready with money, I believe the Future Harvest centers should engage in advocacy with national governments and development assistance agencies to have such delivery systems developed, either through publicly funded national institutions, or international agencies such as FAO, IFAD, World Bank, the regional banks, NGOs, or private consultancy firms. For delivery systems to be effective, investments are likely to be needed in rural infrastructure such as roads, markets, credit institutions, extension, and water management infrastructure. To maximize impact, investments in primary education and health care may be needed. We in the CGIAR should do a much better job putting pressure on the appropriate institutions to get these jobs done, rather than pretending that we have to do it all.

Having been a center director, I know how difficult it is to say no to a donor, even if the available funds are earmarked for activities outside the mandate of the CGIAR. In the short run, it may appear more important to expand revenues than maximizing impact. So, why not get involved in technical assistance to help with location-specific development activities? The main reason is that it is likely to reduce funding available for research either directly by donors or centers channeling money from research with international impact to development activities with local or national impact or indirectly by failing to apply full costing approaches. Both would result in less IPGs and more location-specific activities better done by others. Centers that wish to do location-specific development activities, would probably do the least damage to the mission of the CGIAR if they create financially independent, wholly owned consulting arms through which research results could be made available. But then, why not enter into agreements with private consulting firms instead?

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