

From the Science Council Chair

Among the questions asked about the Science Council led effort to identify system priorities for CGIAR research, six were common. I will try to give a brief answer to each of them.

1. Why priorities? The funds currently available for CGIAR research are miniscule relative to what is needed to fulfill the CGIAR goal. Therefore, the funds that are available must be spent wisely. In the Science Council's opinion, that means that the CGIAR, as a system, must agree to apply a critical mass of resources, both human and financial, to each of a small number of well-defined research areas of critical importance in an effort to fight poverty and unsustainable management of natural resources. This will be more effective than spreading the resources among a large number of more or less related research topics. And it must focus its resources on what it is good at -- strategic international research applicable across national boundaries.
2. What's new? First, the suggested process is new. On the basis of a participatory process with widespread consultation, we have tried to arrive at a set of priorities for CGIAR research. These priorities will be the starting point for priorities and budget allocation by the individual centers, at least for the 80 percent of the system's resources that we suggest be spent on system priority research and integrated capacity strengthening. This is very different from current practice where the system's priorities consist of an aggregation of the individual center activities and plans. Second, we are suggesting that our research be more sharply focused on income and wealth creation among the rural poor. This means research on commodities and products with an expected large increase in future demand, and that generate a higher value per unit of land, water and labor, such as livestock, fish, fruit, and vegetables. Third, to help low-income countries benefit from globalization, the CGIAR should prioritize research on agricultural and food markets at the national and international level, including research to help small farmers meet food safety and other quality requirements. Fourth, we believe that our research on natural resources should be closely linked with productivity enhancement and undertaken in an integrated manner, primarily at the landscape level. Fifth, we are emphasizing research on two abiotic stresses: drought and salinity, and sixth, we want to strengthen CGIAR activities aimed at sustainable management of biodiversity by including efforts to conserve genetic material from selected fish species, indigenous livestock breeds, and some fruit and vegetable species and by expanding capacity building.
3. What's out? The glib answer is that what is not explicitly included is not a priority. We have tried to identify what should be prioritized rather than what should not. The latter becomes an outcome of the former. Therefore, the Science Council will scrutinize the centers' medium term plans and suggest to each center which research activities should be either phased out over the three-year transition

period or included in the 20 percent of the CGIAR budget, that is outside the priority areas. The Future Harvest centers currently spend a significant portion of their resources on development and emergency relief activities rather than research. Such activities are surely important but other organizations exist to do them. Much of the development work consists of country-specific projects that are neither research nor international public goods. While some of these projects are logical extensions of research done by the Centers, much is simply projects for which money was available. The Future Harvest centers should not become consulting firms in which availability of project funds dictate the priorities. The world's foremost publicly funded international agricultural research alliance should focus on what it is best at, namely the creation of international public goods type knowledge and technology and leave the development projects to others. Research that is unlikely to benefit many developing countries should also be excluded. The Future Harvest centers should help strengthen national agricultural systems through collaboration and training, instead of doing their work for them. In our suggested priorities, the Science Council aims at strategic research which will facilitate pro-poor development in many low-income countries.

4. What is included in the 20 percent? Good research takes place in an environment of innovation, in which research institutions and researchers have flexibility to “think outside the box”. Maintaining a proper balance between a sharp system focus on priority research and the freedom to innovate outside the system priority areas through exploratory research, is of critical importance for the CGIAR. The Science Council recommends that 10 percent of the CGIAR funding be allocated to exploratory research. The remaining 10 percent is meant for free-standing capacity strengthening activities and development activities closely related to priority research. At the current budget level, this implies that the Future Harvest centers as a group, can spend \$ 90 million annually outside the system priority research.
5. How will the system priorities be implemented? We suggest that a stakeholder discussion on implementation issues take place as soon as the priorities are agreed upon. While the Science Council has focused on what the system should do, rather than how it should be done, we feel that a discussion about the latter should consider the various options available, taking into account the cost-effectiveness of each and the experience gained. Such a discussion should incorporate on-going and proposed structural changes and be brought to conclusion as soon as possible in order to leave centers to do their work without a continued cloud or threat of structural changes hanging over their heads. Low transactions costs, uncomplicated governance and management structures and direct participation by researchers in the design of collaborative research on each system priority, are three aspects we would like to see included in these discussions.
6. How will the system priority research be funded? There are basically two ways. First, a continuation of current bilateral funding arrangements between individual centers and individual donors in which the only condition stipulated by the donor would be, that the funds are used for priority research, or specific priorities identified in each center's Medium Term Plan. This would give each center the

flexibility to allocate its resources within the priority research it has agreed to do, instead of having to deal with a large number of small projects, which might lead to misallocation of resources and excessive transactions costs. Second, donors could decide to allocate funding to the system, rather than selected centers, for research on system priorities in general or for identified priorities. This would require a new mechanism for allocation to centers and system priorities. Such an approach is currently being discussed by a CGIAR task force. Both of these funding approaches can operate side by side.

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