

# The CGIAR at 31: An Independent Meta-Evaluation of the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research

## OED's Advisory Committee Report

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### 1. Introduction

The Advisory Committee has commented on two successive drafts of this report and takes note of the extensive revisions that have been made. The Committee is impressed with the exhaustive review of the material and the extensive process of consultation the meta-evaluation team engaged in before finalizing this report. Detailed comments were shared with the meta-evaluation team. This note summarizes those comments and responds to the main findings of the evaluation and its recommendations, as described in the *Overview Report (Volume 1)* and enlarged upon and elucidated in the *Technical Report (Volume 2)*.

### 2. Major Findings and Recommendations of the Meta-Evaluation

#### *A. Two models of international agricultural research*

The major thrust of the meta-evaluation is to move the CGIAR System from the prevailing de facto decentralized model toward a more centralized model, combined with devolving some CGIAR activities to the NARS. The **centralized** model—that of the original CGIAR and the basis of its great successes in the 1970s and early 1980s—involves a core scientific *strategy for the CGIAR* based on proposals from the Centers, vetted by a strong scientific authority (originally the TAC and currently the interim Science Council), and backed by *financial* allocations to the Centers and implemented by them with *scientific* autonomy. In contrast, the **decentralized** model involves *financially and strategically* autonomous Centers, led by top scientists with “good” motivations, mobilizing resources for worthy projects from interested parties. The decentralized model can produce splendid results, as it did in some pre-CGIAR institutions such as CIMMYT and IRRI. But under that model there is no System strategy, no linkage of System-wide scientific review to resource allocation, little inter-Center synergy, and heavy dependence on scientific leadership in key Centers.

Today, the CGIAR *formally* uses the centralized model, with a System-level hierarchy and institutions, incurring substantial associated costs. Yet *in reality* the decentralized model applies. Near-autonomous Centers raise an increasing majority of funds bilaterally, tied to specific uses or

projects. They have little incentive to agree on a common strategy. Even if they do, it is not enforced via resource allocation.<sup>1</sup>

The meta-evaluation argues for moving the reality toward an improved form of the centralized model.<sup>2</sup> In support, the report cites the growing number, urgency, and complexity of areas where Centers need to agree on a System-wide strategy and priorities, negotiate with outside bodies, and implement decisions. An important example is the need for inter-Center coordination in the connected areas of genetic resource conservation, germplasm research, biotechnology, and intellectual property rights and other links with the private sector. On such matters a decentralized system has proved unable to implement a System-wide strategy that can have substantially larger impact than currently generated by the sum of the parts. The meta-evaluation at the same time makes a convincing case for devolving some of the NRM and policy research to NARS, while the CGIAR System adopts a more strategic focus within these two areas of research.

### ***B. The analysis and evidence of the meta-evaluation***

The report summarizes evidence of the *large past contribution by the CGIAR* institutions to poverty reduction and economic development, mainly through improved germplasm for basic food staples. It points out that *this contribution is in need of revival*, given the slowdown in the growth of yields of main food staples in the past decade or so; the increasing perception of endangered soil and water resources; and growing poverty and malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa. The meta-evaluation identified *threats to the CGIAR System's future ability to contribute*: a sharp fall in unrestricted funds, and a shift toward restricted funding; a steady fall in CGIAR resources for germplasm work; and “less focus” and inappropriate “downstream” activities in much of the CGIAR’s research program.

The *sharp fall in unrestricted funds* and the *shift toward restricted funding* mean that each Center increasingly solicits and gets funds from a specific donor, often for a purpose responsive to donor pressure groups. This has reduced the power of the CGIAR to implement a System-wide scientific strategy or to influence the priorities of individual Centers. Increasingly, the System has no means either to make strategic and science-based<sup>3</sup> decisions, or (if the TAC or the interim Science Council does so) to *implement* them, by allocating funds or otherwise. The meta-evaluation shows in detail how restricted funding underlies the CGIAR’s failure to develop coherent or System-wide actions on intellectual property rights and links to the private sector, biotechnology, conservation of genetic resources, and links to NARS.

The *steady fall in CGIAR resources for maintenance of genetic resources and research to improve germplasm* has cut sharply the Centers’ proven poverty-oriented and productivity-increasing activity. Ever-scarcer unrestricted funds have to cover ever more “missions” and Centers.

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1. The experience of Challenge Programs suggests that they make the problem worse if iSC vetting continues to be preempted by the raising of “tied” money before the iSC review, as has happened with some grant candidates.

2. The meta-evaluation recommends decentralization where appropriate, saying, for example, that much downstream NRM research that is now in the CGIAR System should be moved to the NARS. The report nowhere suggests reducing the freedom of Center scientists or Directors to follow promising research trails. But the meta-evaluation does emphasize the need for centralized CGIAR System *strategies*, chosen by scientists, implemented through financial allocations, and monitored. We agree.

3. “Science” in these comments includes natural and social sciences, and some applications of law and ethics.

The CGIAR's "loss of strategic focus" and "drift downstream" are exemplified by some of the work on NRM and country policy. NRM is vital to maintain yields and soil-water resources. To this end, new strategic research, to generate new knowledge and technologies—especially regarding water—is needed, and there is a strong case for locating some of it in the CGIAR System. However, as the report shows, there is little tangible evidence of high returns to the CGIAR System's largely downstream research on NRM (except for integrated pest management). Even if returns are high, such research may be locally specific and better done by NARS. Also, adoption of NRM advice by farmers often depends on productivity gains, which are larger with good germplasm, attuned to sustainable high productivity under specific environmental constraints. Therefore, falling CGIAR funds for germplasm research and conservation can undermine the usefulness of NRM research.

The meta-evaluation also noted *lack of routine accountability, via periodic external evaluation of the CGIAR System*. This was traced partly to *insufficient joint action by donors*. The meta-evaluation concluded that there was a case for *the World Bank* (as convener and largest donor) to *ensure accountability of the CGIAR System*, to which it provides \$50 million annually.

### ***C. Recommendations arising out of the meta-evaluation***

Will the ongoing Change Design and Management process cure the problems? It is too early to evaluate that process. Clearly, several elements point in the right direction. The report argues that the Challenge Programs, despite their merits, are unlikely to suffice. Anyway, the CDM process is only a first step, and it cannot solve the basic problem: with a high proportion of funding restricted, ExCo and TAC and the interim Science Council lack the tools and authority to get Centers to agree on, let alone to implement, uncomfortable scientific or strategic priorities. We support the recommendations of the meta-evaluation to remedy this situation, which are largely derived from past evaluations. We draw special attention to the following central recommendations:

- The Bank should lead a "a concerted effort at the highest level . . . particularly to encourage donors to reverse the trend in restricted funding."<sup>4</sup> This may be a precondition for other recommendations in the meta-evaluation:
  - Assuring that "a strong, qualified, and independent Science Council is established and vested with the role and resources to establish System-wide priorities, policies, and strategies, and to monitor and report to the membership on the uses and allocations of CGIAR resources toward fulfilling these priorities, policies, and strategies."
  - "Making ExCo members more fully representative and accountable to the CGIAR membership."
- The functions and powers of World Bank staff and CGIAR Secretariat staff vis-à-vis the System should be separate and transparent, *for example* by "separating oversight and management functions within the Bank to address the conflicts of interest that currently exist."

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4. We recognize the urgent need to increase total funds for the CGIAR System, and the big contribution made to this by some restricted funds and potentially by the Challenge Programs. However, a substantial shift to unrestricted funding is, in our view, now required, and comprises the most important single recommendation. *The restriction of funding is convincingly and repeatedly pinpointed by the meta-evaluation as a major cause of almost every one of the CGIAR System's main problems and deficiencies.*

- It is vital to increase “funding for conventional germplasm enhancement and plant and animal breeding research, in which the CGIAR possesses a comparative advantage,” and to devolve “that portion of the CGIAR’s applied and adaptive NRM research program that does not constitute global or regional public goods research to national and regional agencies.” We would add (a) that CGIAR Center directors, the interim Science Council and ExCo should commit to substantially raising the share of CGIAR outlay devoted to the core competencies — germplasm collection and improvement — on which gains from other CGIAR activities rest; (b) that returns to, and poverty impact of, under-evaluated CGIAR activities (much NRM research, and policy and social-science research outside IFPRI) should be evaluated System-wide.<sup>5</sup>
- In this context, and in line with standard procedure for Bank operations, the Bank should carry out “triennial appraisals of the CGIAR, with Board approval as the basis of continuing Bank support” — with the usual obligations on managers in the Bank to respond to evaluations, and to report progress afterwards.
- As implied in *Technical Report (Volume 2)* of the meta-evaluation, the World Bank should act (and encourage bilateral donors to act) to reverse the collapse in external assistance to agriculture, since recent large falls in investment in developing country agriculture must reduce the impact of CGIAR research.

To these recommendations we add one key point. In practice, the advice of previous reviews of the CGIAR has often been ignored, deferred, rejected, or selectively implemented without System accountability. Some Centers remain unreformed despite highly critical reviews, and important decisions are deferred or handled in an impromptu manner. This may have serious consequences; for example, due to deferred decisions on involvement in biotechnology, “the CGIAR may be threatened with technological obsolescence.” Given this worrying and correct diagnosis, we feel the recommendations for remedial action in the *Overview Report (Volume 1)* could have been even sharper.

Furthermore, repeated failure by intelligent people to take recommended, sensible action<sup>6</sup> implies strong reasons, which are of three types. First, any change involves transaction costs. Second, “political economy” pressures lead individuals or groups to defend powers and privileges that they enjoy under present arrangements. Third, there are problems of collective action.

### 3. Conclusion

At present the CGIAR faces a “tragedy of the commons.” Each donor furthers its aims by providing funds restricted to those aims. Each Center goes its own way, partly to get such funds, partly because doing so frees it from pressures to work with the System as a whole. The results are lack of System-wide strategy, little sense of overall ownership, and loss of System efficiency. Donors and Centers, *each* acting on their own priorities, together produce results that harm the priorities and productivity of *all*.

Many of the objections, in all three categories, can be addressed by building on the recommendations of the meta-evaluation to broker a “deal.” This involves a big shift from restricted to unrestricted funding by donors. In return for this sacrifice of direct control, the

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5. Individual Centers are often over-evaluated, with tangible benefits but also huge direct and indirect costs. The performance, priorities, and processes of the System, however, largely escape evaluation.

6. Three standard defenses against evaluation: “you have won” (we are doing it); “you are outdated” (we were acting on these lines long ago); and “you are wrong.” Often the same person uses two or three of these.

donors would get: restoration of the scientific authority of the incipient Science Council; clear validation by ExCo of Center activities through the use of science-based recommendations as the main input into allocating funds; and regular evaluations of the use of those funds and of the CGIAR's System-wide performance as a base for continued donor support.

Under the deal, scientists and managers in the CGIAR lose some chances to lobby donors for funds. In return for this sacrifice, the Centers would get: autonomy to follow the most promising scientific path, consistent with agreed strategy; freeing up of formerly restricted resources, for example, for germplasm research and conservation; and reduction of management cost and time.

Most CGIAR scientists and Center Directors would ultimately find that they gained from this trade-off (though those whose work depends on donor funds unlinked to strategic research or developmental results would lose). Donors would lose power to use bilateral funds to insert their priorities as "tied aid" to specific agendas. However, donors' total aid to the CGIAR better serves *any* developmental priorities, including each donor's, if backed by scientific authority guiding ExCo allocations to impose accountability. Most donors would feel they gained from the trade-off (though those who allocate CGIAR assistance mainly for purposes of national interest would lose). The cost of funds and management is lowered to the CGIAR System, and it is enabled efficiently to link a strategy to outlays, changing both as circumstances change.

This thorough, illuminating report accurately reviews and develops the picture of the CGIAR contained in past reviews of performance of individual Centers, and by a few intermittent reviews of the System as a whole. Its proposals are, in large measure, essential if the research contribution of the System is to thrive. The World Bank is well placed to overcome the collective action problem and build the trust needed to induce donors, Centers, and the CGIAR System centrally to move together in the directions indicated. In asserting this responsibility for corporate governance of the CGIAR System, the Bank should work closely with other major donors of unrestricted funds.

Once this report has completed the internal Bank review process it should be published so as to generate an informed debate about CGIAR reform. It is the most comprehensive and authoritative analysis available of the CGIAR and the challenges it faces in "nourishing the future through scientific excellence."

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