

SCIENCE COUNCIL OF THE CGIAR
Overview Commentary – CGIAR Medium Term Plans (MTPs) 2009-2011

This overview document complements the SC full commentary on the individual MTPs of Centers and CPs that is provided as a background document for the ExCo-15 meeting.

Why MTPs and why review them?

The Science Council (SC) is tasked to enhance and promote the quality, relevance and impact of science in the CGIAR. The SC's independent assessment and advice on the Medium Term Plans (MTP) of the Centers and Challenge programs (CPs) is the CGIAR's principle mechanism for the assessment of relevance of research. The SC provides this assessment on behalf of the CGIAR System. The CGIAR follows a forward planning horizon of three years for the implementation of the research agenda. It does this through a rolling MTP where the research agenda is reviewed and adjusted in the context of the CGIAR's priorities and strategies, progress in science and funding opportunities. The "first year" of the rolling MTP presents the annual work plan for which the Centers and CPs seek endorsement and subsequent funding.

The CGIAR research for development is output-focused using a logframe to establish the links from outputs through outcomes to impacts. SC has been working with Centers for four years to transform the MTP into a useful planning tool that a) serves the Centers' own need to aggregate their internal program planning and management into sufficiently large research undertakings that can contribute to the CGIAR's research agenda; b) communicates efficiently the Center's research plan to external audiences, especially the donors; and c) allows transparent monitoring of progress and achievement of output targets. The MTP, including the logframes, has become the central element in the planning of research relevant to the priorities of the CGIAR and for monitoring progress in achieving outputs and outcomes to meet the CGIAR goals. Thus MTPs are both an internal planning and management tool and a means for monitoring progress externally.

The SC reviews the plans for programmatic content and relevance, for significant programme changes usually following EPMRs and changes in Strategic plans, for opportunities for synergies among Centers and CPs to improve efficiency and for clarity in planning.

Making the MTPs multi functional

The MTP is evolving as a document that serves three main purposes: It is an internal document linked to internal planning and monitoring that is becoming an asset to the Centers; The MTP is a tool for the Centers to communicate with each other about joint research and planning; The MTPs are easily accessible to the outside world presenting the individual Centers' work and the CGIAR's joint research agenda.

The preparation and submission of the MTPs this year used an online software application “EasyMTP” (the local module) which was developed by the ICT-KM program in collaboration with the Centers (i.e. the main users of the MTPs). This is linked to a central System level database (CGMap) which is being developed at the same time. The new software and central database facilitate the three main purposes for the MTP. Internally the EasyMTP software can facilitate the continuous process of planning, i.e. building on earlier MTPs and linking the MTP data to the Center’s internal project management systems. At the System level, CGMap can facilitate analysis of collective components of research on priority research areas thereby facilitating efforts towards further coherence and programmatic planning. It also facilitates the use of the MTP by the Centers and by external reviewers for monitoring of progress.

The quality and utility of the MTPs

There is clearly a broad range of quality amongst the present MTPs. Some Centers have produced very realistic plans that show that they have a very clear view of their niche/comparative advantage – IRRI, IWMI for instance. Some Centers appear to use the MTP as their main research management tool (e.g. IWMI) others see them as a hoop that the SC makes them jump through (IITA). Most of the MTPs are far too long; Centers should be encouraged to provide more coherent and succinct description of their research; where it is coming from, which previous research results it is building on and how it intends to provide solutions to the problems clearly identified.

Starting from last year, the SC has identified MTPs that do not require a detailed commentary every year. In 2007 seven MTPs (CIFOR, CIMMYT, IFPRI, ILRI, IRRI, Generation CP, HarvestPlus) were graduated to a periodic review schedule (every three years unless there are major changes). *This year the SC identified four additional MTPs (ICARDA, IWMI, WorldFish Center, SSA-CP) that will not be reviewed in detail next year.* The remaining Center/CP MTPs are considered to require in-depth review in 2009 due to anticipated changes from EPMP or Strategic planning or due to deficiencies in the MTP (Africa Rice Center, Bioversity, CIAT, CIP, ICRISAT, IITA, World Agroforestry Center, Water&Food CP). The SC plans to continue dialogue to help all Centers and CPs to upgrade their MTPs; there are several that can be used as models.

Relevance to CGIAR priority research

In 2005 the SC reported to ExCo that their analysis of the MTP’s (2006-2009) showed that: i) Many of the activities proposed are unlikely to result in IPGs; ii) Too much effort is being spent on development activities of a local nature with little or no research content; iii) A better specification of the pathways from outputs to impact is needed; and iv) More interaction is needed across Centers on several activities undertaken by them such as innovation system, delivery systems and INRM at the landscape level.

In the SC’s view there has been a positive change in the focus of the research since then as seen in the current MTP’s. Most Centers and CPs now provide the rationale for the

research and how it will contribute to IPGs. The impact pathways also indicate how associated capacity strengthening, partnerships, advocacy and 'local pilot projects' can enhance outcomes.¹ *There is however a need to pay attention to the following issues:*

a) The "accounting" of contribution to the priorities at individual MTP level does not mean there is a cohesive program to achieve the priority goals (development outcomes). There is no evidence from the current MTP's of collective action in emerging areas. For example, 12 Centers address issues of markets, 8 of innovation systems, 9 of seed systems and 10 of high value crops as seen in the MTPs, but there is no apparent synergy sought among the individual research suppliers. In the SC view there is an urgent need to plan for such development outcomes at a system level developing coherent research programs.

b) In many MTPs the project portfolio reflects a lack of internal priority setting and focus and there is a natural inclination of trying to do too much (for example the list of target traits in most of the crop improvement programmes). The fact that things are important does not mean that the CGIAR necessarily has a comparative advantage in dealing with them. Very few of the MTPs give a clear statement of the hypothesis to be tested by each project; rather they indicate an intention to "engage with a subject area of concern". In the SC view, the Centers need to devolve more to the NARS and focus on fewer output and outcome lines.²

c) In 2005 the SC advised ExCo *"as programmes become more broadly defined it is essential that the research priorities and goals are clearly spelled out in the MTP. Along with the integration of research and development the Centers need to provide scientific clarity for international public goods to permit extrapolation of results and out scaling for reaching large impacts across localities and ecosystems. There is a noticeable trend, particularly in these very complex environments where progress in sustainable productivity is difficult to achieve and demonstrate, to focus on institutional processes. It is important that generalisable lessons can be drawn in reasonable time limits for expanding the use of the experiences from local processes."* The SC flags the need to continue to monitor the IPG nature of outputs from a number of complex programs where there are no clearly defined pathways.

d) Several MTPs are still very long and verbose.

¹ This re-focus on IPG research is exemplified in the CP SSA commentary where the SC makes the following observations *"The SSA-CP now stresses the 'proof of concept' (of the R4D approach) as the key IPG that will be delivered. The innovations of the PLSs are now a means to an end and are no longer claimed to be the key IPGs (although it is not precluded that they might be eventually). Annex 1 offers a good overview of the thinking that has gone into meeting the 'proof of concept' challenge. The proponents are aware of the shortcomings, but argue convincingly that this approach is doable and verifiable. The SC considers that the proposed approach is plausible"*.

² Regarding focus, two recent EPMRs have provided sound advice; the external review of the GCP recommends that that program focus on the delivery of no more than seven (7) crop/ allele product lines in order to achieve any impact and the EPMR of CIAT advised on the design of regional projects around "outcome lines" where activities would focus on a reduced number of constraints (2-3) to enhance the likelihood of outcomes.

Follow through on EPMR recommendations

Over the last 2 years a large number of Centers and CPs have been externally reviewed: Africa Rice, CIAT, CIFOR, CIP, ICARDA, IITA, ILRI, IWMI, World Agroforestry Center, WorldFish Center and Water&Food, HarvestPlus and Generation CPs. All of these Centers and CP have reported in their MTPs progress in the implementation of the recommendations endorsed by the CGIAR. The SC's assessment of this progress is given in the individual center/CP comments.

Concluding Remarks

The SC began a thorough review of the MTPs in 2004. Before then the SC's predecessor TAC provided a brief commentary with focus mainly on changes from previous MTP. The MTPs then were used only for perfunctory purposes as a means to justify the annual budget. It is not clear how widely they were read. Their quality was inadequate to obtain a clear view of the relevance of the Centers' research and capacity strengthening activities or how the Center planned to monitor progress toward CGIAR priorities. It also seems that individual scientists did not recognise their work in the MTP, i.e. the linkage to Center's internal research management did not exist in many cases. At its first meeting, the SC viewed that investors deserved more.

In 2004 the SC improved the guidelines for the MTP process in collaboration with the Centers (ADE). The changes included strong output and outcome orientation in the logframe, leaving out elements relevant to internal project management for those management systems to handle, explicit emphasis on international public goods, preparation of clear impact pathway descriptions, elaboration of partners' role in research, clear reporting on the implementation of EPMR recommendations, and a stronger Systems orientation. Since then, the SC's efforts have been directed to improve the content and clarity of these essential MTP components that now form the basic structure of the MTP database.

The SC understands that some Centers find the development of a quality MTP a "burden"; but we hold the view that an efficient system must have in place a plan that forms the basis for management of resources for optimum outputs and for monitoring progress. The majority of Centers now have such a Plan. The SC aims to review these every three years and when there are major changes such as those from an EPMR.