



Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR)

Interim SCIENCE COUNCIL
Emil Q. Javier, Chair

9 September 2003

Dear Ian,

It is my pleasure to submit to you the Report of the Fifth External Programme Review of ICRISAT, commissioned by the interim Science Council. The Panel was chaired by Dr. Paul Vlek of the Netherlands.

The Review Report and ICRISAT's Written Response to it were considered by the interim Science Council at its 85th meeting held on 30 and 31 August 2003 at the University of California, Berkeley. The Panel Chair presented the Report and ICRISAT was represented by the Board Chair, Dr. Uzo Mokwunye and the Director General, Dr. William Dar.

In addition to the Panel's Report, there are two attachments to this letter, the first containing the commentary of the interim Science Council, which summarizes the Council's views on both the Panel's Report and the Written Response from ICRISAT; and the second is ICRISAT's Response to the Review Report.

The interim Science Council generally endorsed all the 9 recommendations, and noted the very positive response from ICRISAT. The Institute has undergone a difficult period of management changes and reduced overall funding as well as reduced unrestricted funding. Despite these difficulties, there has been laudable improvement in key strategic areas in science, governance and management. Given the compelling justification for a stronger and continued international role for raising productivity, alleviating poverty and sustaining the environment in the semi-arid tropics, the Institute continues to deserve donor support.

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Mr. Ian Johnson
CGIAR Chair
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cc: Francisco J. B. Reifschneider
Director, CGIAR

The interim Science Council agrees with the Panel that ICRISAT has reached a defining moment in its evolution. It must now establish a new long-term vision and structural strategy that would: (i) consolidate its gains in Asia as it shifts its Asia work to strategically supporting the rapidly growing strength of NARS in Asia; and (ii) strengthen and redirect its focus on the challenges of Sub-Saharan Africa, necessitating a paradigm shift in research strategy to take into account the heterogeneity of agricultural environments, the relatively weak national scientific capacity in research and extension, the relatively undeveloped private sector in agricultural and related rural industries, and the unfavourable policy environment.

ICRISAT has expressed its commitment to seize the opportunity for implementing the proposed fundamental changes but it needs donor support in both “spirit and matter”. Donor support for meeting the one-time relocation cost would be essential, as would high level CGIAR involvement in discussions with India on the plan to shift the Headquarters to Sub-Saharan Africa. Given the need to maintain the existing strong and valuable relationship with India for the CGIAR international effort, the CGIAR leadership should work with ICRISAT to facilitate the envisaged discussions with India government.

We trust that the Group will find the Panel’s Report and attached communication helpful in reflecting on the challenges facing ICRISAT and the CGIAR in the future.

Yours sincerely,

(Signed)

Emil Q. Javier
iSC Chair

iSC Commentary on the Fifth External Programme Review of ICRISAT

The report of the Fifth External Programme Review (EPR) of ICRISAT was discussed at iSC/TAC 85, University of California, Berkeley, in the presence of the Panel Chair Dr. Paul Vlek, the Chair of ICRISAT's Board of Trustees, Dr. Uzo Mokwunye, ICRISAT DG, Dr. William Dar, and ICRISAT DDG Research, Dr. Dyno Keatinge. The interim Science Council (iSC) expresses its appreciation to Dr. Paul Vlek and the members of the Panel for an analytical and forward-looking report that confirms ICRISAT's areas of excellence and the praiseworthy changes during the review period, and offers recommendations for a structural transformation of the Institute in the coming years.

The iSC accepted the EPR Panel Report and generally endorsed all the 9 recommendations. The iSC is pleased to note the very positive response from the ICRISAT Board and management. The iSC provides the following commentary based on the discussions at the iSC/TAC 85 to supplement the work of the Panel.

Response to 4th EPMR

The 4th EPMR contained 10 recommendations. Overall the Panel considered the action taken in the research domain over the past 6 years in response to the 4th EPMR to be of mixed quality. This is believed to be due partly to disagreements that existed within and between management and the Board. The iSC is pleased to note that the situation seems to have been sorted out, although the resulting turbulence and instability have caused a delay in the implementation of some of the recommendations. TAC in its commentary on the 4th EPMR fully supported the recommendations and the Panel's preference for the 'new ICRISAT' with a two-pronged strategy, consistent with the contrasting needs in Asia and Africa. TAC stated, "There seem to be no reason, in principle, why the Director General of this Centre should not be based in Africa. This point is raised to illustrate how the thinking at ICRISAT should change and broaden."

The Report of the 5th EPR contains one recommendation (Recommendation 9) that deals with the fundamental question of the future structure and strategy of ICRISAT. The iSC considers that Recommendation 9 deals with unfinished business initiated in response to the 4th EPMR, and is of the opinion that the need to implement Recommendation 9 to create a new ICRISAT for the 21st Century is now urgent.

Genetic Resources and Crop Improvement

The iSC commends ICRISAT for its achievements in setting up a biotechnology and transformation programme, bringing to bear "new science and tools" for conservation and improvement of its mandate crops. The Panel has recommended (Recommendation 1), and the iSC agrees, that the Institute together with the other CGIAR Centres and relevant partners, address the pressing issues on intellectual property, biosafety and public acceptance of transgenic crops. Additionally, the Panel has recommended (Recommendation 5) that ICRISAT address the anticipated problems related to delivery and marketing of transgenic material it will produce. The iSC considers these issues to be pervasive, requiring proactive attention. It is of great importance that the resource and infrastructure implications of the

issues related to biosafety and delivery of transgenic material are understood clearly by ICRISAT and its partners. It is almost certain that the cost of biosafety research will not be cheap and nor will be the institutional cost of handling and transferring finished transgenic material to beneficiaries.

The iSC commends ICRISAT for its impressive achievements in plant breeding in its mandate crops. However, the iSC fully shares the Panel's concerns regarding the weakening of its breeding programmes in Africa, and the less than optimum integration between genetic enhancement work located in GT1 (Harnessing Biotechnology for the Poor) and crop improvement work located in GT2 (Crop Improvement, Management and Utilization for Food Security and Health). The iSC is in agreement with Recommendation 3 for ICRISAT to rapidly rebuild its breeding programmes in Africa, and to re-engineer its genetic enhancement and crop improvement activities to serve the differential needs of Asia and Africa for international public goods (IPGs).

The iSC is pleased to learn that the process of integrating activities in GT1 and GT2 is already underway, and that ICRISAT intends to create an interdisciplinary partnership for genetic resources and enhancement with NARS and the private sector in the Asia region. However, the iSC remains concerned at the fact that in recent years ICRISAT has not been able to mobilize adequate stable support for its crop improvements activities in Africa that has consequently suffered from high turn over of senior staff and discontinuities. The rebuilding of ICRISAT's breeding programmes in Africa must remain a top priority, requiring the development of staff recruitment and deployment strategies that would minimize transfers and provide sufficient overlapping of personnel for effective continuity in activities with long time-frames.

Social Sciences

The iSC notes that ICRISAT agreed with Recommendation 7 to establish a critical mass of social scientists in all regions to create an appropriate balance in activities managed in GT6 (SAT Futures and Development Pathways) and social sciences research in the other Global Themes. The iSC supports ICRISAT's intention to maintain distinctiveness for social science activities at ICRISAT under the GT6 programme, while contributing to the interdisciplinary nature of the other programmes. ICRISAT is in the process of strengthening its critical mass of social scientists, and the iSC agrees that this could be done innovatively in part by hiring young professionals.

Virtual University

The Panel has seriously questioned ICRISAT's comparative advantage in serving as a key proponent in launching the Virtual University for the SAT, and recommended (Recommendation 8) that ICRISAT should rationalize its role, scope and objectives in the University initiative. Secondly, the Panel has pointed out the confusion inherent in the use of the term University which conventionally is applied to academic institutions offering degrees at the tertiary level whereas in reality the main activity of the Virtual University is to deliver information to producers and intermediate actors. The iSC therefore agrees with the concerns highlighted by the Panel and recommends that ICRISAT take the necessary steps to define clearly its ultimate objectives and role in the enterprise before further major investments of funds, personnel and management attention are directed to it.

Other Specific Programme Recommendations

The Panel has made other specific programme recommendations, namely the need: to phase out GT3 (Water, Soil and Agrobiodiversity Management) in Asia where it no longer has a comparative advantage (Recommendation 3); to prioritize and consolidate IPM and IDM activities in GT3 (Recommendation 4); to rationalize the role, scope and objectives in terms of its comparative advantage in conducting research in generating IPGs in GT4 (Sustainable Seed Supply Systems for Productivity) (Recommendation 5); and to merge GT5 (Enhancing Crop-Livestock Productivity and Systems Diversification) with GT3 (Recommendation 6). ICRISAT has accepted all these recommendations, and the iSC looks forward to their implementation.

Future of ICRISAT

The iSC strongly supports Recommendation 9 on the transfer of ICRISAT Headquarters and all programmes to Africa with the exception of its strategic plant genetic resources and enhancement programme. To implement Recommendation 9, the iSC supports the proposal on the Centre's response of establishing a Task Force to design and plan the transfer. The iSC believes that a prerequisite for successful implementation will be the availability of sufficient funding from donors to cover one-time transfer costs. It will be important to preserve the excellent relations between ICRISAT and India by involving the CGIAR leadership at the earliest opportunity in the discussion with the host government of the new arrangement for the global branch of ICRISAT that will remain in India to address the SAT needs, including those of Asia, for which there is continued support. The iSC also believes that this is an opportunity for the CGIAR to take a broad view of its operations in Sub-Saharan Africa and, as ICRISAT plans to move, to assess the needs for streamlining and coordination of CGIAR Centres operations in the region.

The iSC recommends that the Task Force that will be appointed by ICRISAT Board should consider all tactical issues related to the transfer as well as the needs for changing scientific paradigms as some programmes move from Asia to Africa. The iSC also suggests that the Task Force works closely with the Science Council (SC) while it develops its plans, perhaps by including a SC member as part of the Task Force.

Organization and Management

The iSC is pleased that the Board has become more effective in working with management and staff in turning the Centre around from where it was at the time of the last EPMR and the first few years thereafter. The current Director General and management have also contributed in creating an enabling environment for research. The resulting effectiveness and stability has had a positive effect on the Institute's relationship with the host government and on staff morale. The iSC commends this laudable transformation of ICRISAT leading to improvement in key strategic areas. The iSC considers that this changed leadership and political situation should be taken full advantage of by the Centre in pushing ahead more earnestly with unfinished business, particularly the need to structurally transform the Centre as elaborated above.

Conclusion

ICRISAT has undergone a difficult period of management changes and reduced overall funding as well as reduced unrestricted funding. Despite these difficulties, ICRISAT has managed to produce science of high quality and achieve impressive impact in Asia as witnessed by the Institute gaining two King Baudouin Awards during the review period. There has also been laudable improvement in atmosphere and relations with new management and Board. Given the compelling justification for a stronger and continued international role for ICRISAT in the SAT in those circumstances where it has a comparative advantage, the Institute continues to deserve donor support.

The iSC agrees with the Panel that ICRISAT has reached a defining moment in its evolution. It must now establish a new long-term vision and structural strategy that would: (i) consolidate its gains in Asia as it shifts its Asia work to strategically supporting the rapidly growing strength of NARS in Asia; and (ii) strengthen and redirect its focus on the challenges of Sub-Saharan Africa, necessitating a paradigm shift in research strategy to take into account the heterogeneity of agricultural environments, the relatively weak national scientific capacity in research and extension, relatively undeveloped private sector in agricultural and related rural industries, and the unfavourable policy environment.

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