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Dear Dr. Johnson and dear Dr. Reifschneider,

**The CGIAR and the Future of Small and Poor NARS
The Role of ISNAR**

I am writing in response to the Report of the CGIAR Team on Restructuring ISNAR, as well as Grant Scobie's letter to you of September 5.

But first, allow me to briefly introduce myself: I was ISNAR's Director General from 1990 – 1997, and I have worked in agricultural development for more than 31 years, including over 3 years in Kenya's Ministry of Agriculture (as a member of a German Technical Assistance Team) and thereafter for 21 years at the FAO in Rome, before joining ISNAR. For most of my time at FAO I was in the Agricultural Operations Division (AGO), first as Service Chief for Africa, then as Deputy Director and finally director for the whole division. AGO was charged with implementation of all of FAO's field projects in agriculture and economic development. During the last 4 years in Rome I was the Assistant Director General for the Agriculture Department, also with responsibilities for FAO's role and its contributions towards the CGIAR. In 1990 I retired from FAO to assume the responsibilities as ISNAR's DG, a position in an institute through which I felt the CG system could (and would) provide necessary services and make important contributions for the national agricultural research systems (NARS), above all in small and poorer countries. In 1992, while at ISNAR, I had accepted the German Government's specific request to become its official candidate for the post of the DG of FAO, to be elected in the FAO Conference in 1993. After my unsuccessful candidature, some ISNAR Board members felt that I had become too political. Therefore I retired after 7 years as ISNAR's DG. Now I have assumed inter alia the chairmanship of the German Forum on Research for Development (DFOR).

I am writing to you as only recently I have seen the proposals for ISNAR's future which, if implemented, are likely to compromise or eliminate several special aspects of ISNAR's past support to poorer and smaller NARS. Put simply, will a CGIAR without ISNAR – or with a greatly modified ISNAR - still provide the necessary and expected assistance to small and poor NARS? Will the CG system provide important services to a large group of countries that still need them? If “the CGIAR focus on the poor”, then without doubt ISNAR has in the past, and should even more in the future, focus on the poor countries and poor NARS.

From the very beginning ISNAR was meant to be different from the other Centers, as indicated in its name. As a “service” ISNAR was also to react to the needs and requirements of NARS, assisting and strengthening them in servicing their national agricultural industries and serving their nations. As nations are different, their NARS are different, and one uniform assistance package, suitable for all NARS, could not be produced.. In the past most NARS have known that with their sometimes special needs and requirements they could always approach ISNAR for assistance. (Subject to availability of (donor) funds - large and rich NARS were expected to contribute to the costs – small and poor NARS were not to be charged.).

In my reading, the latest IRT report gives the impression to be “donor driven” and does not appear sensitive to the differences between small or poor and large or rich NARS. No doubt: the donor community was never very happy with ISNAR – too independent, -- too service oriented – due to lack of funds not always acting but reacting – too little long term planning – and zero or few direct benefits for the donors. ISNAR was always different from the other centers. The available, very limited funds were in no way adequate to the tasks ISNAR was either expected or requested to undertake, mainly by the NARS (not by many donors).

Were the NARS, especially those of the small and poor countries (ideally as a group), asked for comments or inputs about how in future ISNAR should ideally be structured to assist them? From reading the report this does not appear to be the case. Are studies and general advice really the best (and only) ways to support NARS — especially in small and poor countries, but in others as well? If ISNAR is to focus on publishing studies, how are these newly planned studies and their results to be implemented by many NARS, if ISNAR's service function is eliminated? Traditionally ISNAR would have helped in planning and implementing studies and very often also their recommendations.

This letter cannot react to all – not even to many sections of the report – but allow me to select a few points which I consider of importance.

1.) section 1.1. (of the report) Evolving Context of NARS

It is widely accepted that many NARS — as the report states — “could benefit from the types of products and services” that ISNAR could offer. It is further stated that “the demands are significantly different

from those 20 years ago” and that “alternative suppliers have emerged”. Where is the evidence that these two last statements are true in and for the 50 smallest and poorest countries? Is it true that the ROs, SROs and GFAR are mandated, and have also resources to meet the needs of especially the poorer NARS? Is in the group of small countries now “the private sector a stronger actor in agricultural innovation systems”? Can “changes and reforms within public sector agriculture research due to reduced funding” make ISNAR unnecessary – no longer needed? Frankly, I do not believe these statements are correct or represent the opinions of very many NARS leaders.

2.) section 1.2. International Public Goods and ISNAR

In the past much (most?) of ISNAR’s work was tailor made to specific needs – some of it even determined by the donor(s). As a service ISNAR did not see its “main objective to generate IPGs”. In fact: ISNAR wanted to provide services to individual or to groups of NARS with similar problems — and was explicitly asked to do so.

3.) section 1.3 Key Premises of the Restructuring

The report states that “about 20 percent of the CGIAR centers’ expenditures are devoted to capacity building”. Has there ever been a full evaluation of this statement (or assumption) – and what were the results and what was the reaction of the NARS? ISNAR, during my time and also before, always considered NARS not only its clients – but first and foremost its partners, thereby benefiting the work and the implementation of the recommendations. It is stated that “ISNAR’s programs of activities should be much more tightly focused.” This statement seems to underestimate that a large part of ISNAR’s work was reacting, as well as some donors’ influence (through funding) on a center’s program of work. At the same time the sentence indicates that ISNAR can (should) no longer be a “service” to assist NARS in solving their very specific problems, problems which might not be directly linked to poverty alleviation, but to other national problems (for example: more efficient use of scarce resources, better linkages between education, extension and research, etc).

4.) section 2.1 Demand for ISNAR-type Products and Services

It would have been beneficial for the report and its conclusions, if the concerned group of NARS would have had a chance to formulate their relevant needs – instead of these needs being assumed by a team.

5.) section 2.2. Products and Services

The report very clearly indicates that according to the authors, ISNAR should no longer be a service – but provide first and foremost generic knowledge products. It can be argued that such products (while necessary) do not necessarily reflect many basic needs of small and poor NARS. Nor can it be proven that small and poor NARS will benefit greatly from such generic knowledge products and could use them, due to different national, historical, political and/or resource situations, as well as national policies and priorities.

6.) section 2.2.3 Agricultural Research Policy

If ISNAR “has more recently failed to generate (in this area) the type of outputs expected of an international center “ then the question should be allowed: who has expected (in what form, when and where) these outputs, the donors, the CG system, or ISNAR’s partners – the NARS?

7.) section 2.3 Alternative Suppliers

The list of alternative suppliers provided by the report is long and could be acceptable if the poor NARS and their leaders (the demand side) had produced it. Several CGIAR centers are listed to provide policy analysis and deal with IPR issues – but why is the team’s earlier stated budget expenditure of 20% for capacity building not mentioned and explained? All CG centers face alternative suppliers of their products and services — and in this respect a general, careful assessment of each center’s niche and comparative advantage should be looked at. To the best of my knowledge a comparative, overall assessment of all centers` quality of output and effectiveness has yet to be prepared.

8.) section 2.4 Priorities for the New ISNAR Program

Almost at the end of the report, the authors state: “ In the time available to the IRT, it has been possible to carry out only a cursory analysis of the demand for and the supply of ‘ISNAR type’ products and services”. This appears to call into question the whole report: Must a full analysis of this type not be a first step before any re-organization of ISNAR is contemplated? Or was the report written after the decision to restructure ISNAR in a certain way was already taken?

Table 2 indicates the capacity of alternative suppliers – is this list linked to quality criteria (if so, which ones?) and based on proven past outputs and services, or on the team’s feelings, or on the suppliers’ self-evaluation? For what category of NARS is the information correct, for the large and rich NARS – or also for the small and poor?

The IRT states “that ISNAR can add value to the existing investments in national and international research; in short, complementing the investment of others to ensure it has the maximum possible impact on poverty alleviation”. In the past ISNAR was mainly concerned about national investments in national research. If “the CGIAR focus on the poor”, then without doubt ISNAR has in the past, and should even more in the future, focus on the poor countries and poor NARS, many with little (mostly national) investments.

The IRT’s proposal for ISNAR is to concentrate “on analytical and action research in agricultural innovation systems” and “to form strategic alliances with ARIs ... in implementing a credible strategic research agenda in this area.” With concentration on analytical and action research, the CG system will give up ISNAR’s traditional service functions. According to the report, for the traditional O&M program, alternative suppliers should draw on ISNAR’s products – and ISNAR’s agenda in this field should be reduced to 20 – 30 % (of what budget size

in monetary terms?). What products can be expected with a certainly very limited budget?

9. Recommendation 1: Program

The first (primary) theme of the Team's recommendation ("to produce new knowledge with strong international public good characteristics, which contributes to institutional change") without doubt is being implemented by many other international and national actors. What can be the strength of a very small ISNAR in this field? For the 2nd theme it would have been helpful if the IRT would have provided some information on what is included (or excluded) under the heading "organization and management".

It may be assumed that many of ISNAR's former or potential future partners, especially the small and poor NARS (and not only in Sub-Saharan Africa) would turn the two major themes of a new ISNAR Program around. Based on past experience, above all they expect from a Service institute considerable assistance to improve their own performance through better organization and management.

In Appendix C of the report, the IRT lists under "Persons Consulted" nearly exclusively colleagues from CG-centers and donors. Representatives of small and poor countries and NARS are difficult to identify. Of the report only about 13 pages deal with the general tasks of strengthening NARS, but 16 pages with restructuring options, location etc. for a new, a different ISNAR. The reader must assume that the second part is important, decisions have already been taken(?), as in past years the donor community had reduced ISNAR's funding – especially funds for the service function to and the strengthening of small NARS.

ISNAR's possible disappearance may start a general discussion of necessary adjustments within the CG system. But the urgent question remains: After the so far proposed ISNAR restructuring will many of the small and poor NARS be better off, or will they be worse off than before? Will the estimated benefits of the proposed changes be greater than keeping ISNAR, but introducing some necessary changes, adjustments and providing better, more secure funding for a true service to small and poor NARS?

Is the IRT report really centering on restructuring ISNAR – or is it a discussion about a CG system without ISNAR – and possibly also without ISNAR's past services to some NARS? No doubt, so far and rightly so, the large and rich NARS (or potentially large and rich countries) have benefited most from the CG system. Has the system ever asked itself "what has been and what can be done for the small and poorer countries and their NARS?"

With respect to the importance of NARS, the German Parliamentary Secretary in the BMZ stated last month that within agricultural research the German Government's 2nd of five priorities was strengthening of

NARS. The question arises: will the CG system be able to really strengthen NARS with a restructured ISNAR, with a different mandate and changed functions. Will the CGIAR in future (without ISNAR) be able to provide the necessary and expected assistance to the relatively large group of small and poor NARS?

Can it be assumed that the CG system will delete from its own agenda the demand driven service functions for the benefit of small and poor NARS. In the past ISNAR has attempted to help NARS also in their priority setting work. The time may have come for some NARS (including also the small and poor ones) to assist the CG system to set priorities, maybe to give greater importance to some aspects of the demand and not of the supply side of each Center's program of work.

With regard to this report I personally hope that the CG system will reconsider its next steps, or that the NARS will succeed in finding new partners for some of their major institutional needs – which in the past ISNAR has tried to support with a very small budget.

Dear Dr. Johnson and Dr. Reifschneider, I would be greatly appreciate it, if this letter could be widely distributed within the CG system before final decisions are taken.

With good wishes for the CG-system to select and to implement the best of several options – above all the best option for the benefit of those often forgotten and undervalued NARS world-wide, who try hard to serve the rural people in small and poor countries..

Sincerely yours

Christian Bonte-Friedheim
(Honored by the CGIAR in October 1996 with the 2nd Nyle Brady Award “For his tireless life-long efforts as a champion of the NARS “