

Unlocking Genetic Diversity in Crops for the Resource-poor Challenge Program: Lessons Learned

Background

The Genetic Resources Challenge Program (CP) has had a rather rapid development. A very brief concept note was drafted during ICW in October, 2001 and, on the basis of this, the CP was selected as one of three for further development to the full-proposal stage with the assistance of a \$200K development grant. Technical meetings were held at IRRI in March of 2002 and at CIMMYT in May of 2002. The latter meeting was facilitated by an independent expert, Dr Cal Qualset of UC-Davis. A governance Task Force also met in May 2002, at IPGRI to review the structure and content of the CP proposal which was submitted to the iSC in July 2002.

The iSC reviewed the CP in late August 2002 and gave it a strong endorsement, particularly in terms of the quality of science. The CP also received strong support from many sources for its role in developing enabling technologies as public goods. The need for a public platform to benefit the world's resource poor has been a recurring theme in our discussions as the CP has developed.

There were some queries about aspects of the business plan. ExCo reviewed the CP in September 2002 and recommended that it not be approved until such time as a number of issues were satisfactorily addressed. The AGM in October supported this recommendation.

In response to the concerns raised, the three lead centres: CIMMYT, IPGRI and IRRI decided to organise a stakeholder meeting in January 2003 in Alexandria. Following this meeting a revised proposal, with particular attention to the issues raised by ExCo and the AGM, was submitted in early February 2003. ExCO reviewed the revised proposal, which had mainly focused on an improved business plan, during the period February-March and sought further clarification of some issues. This was provided and the CP was endorsed by ExCo for an inception phase of one year. The CP was finally approved in July by the CGIAR membership on a no-objection basis.

Following approval of the CP, a technical planning workshop has been held in Wageningen (25-29 August) followed by the first meeting of the Program Steering Committee (PSC), comprising senior representatives of 8 CGIAR centres, 5 ARIs, 2 NARS and GFAR, the EC, and independent Chair, Dr Ismail Serageldin. Key outcomes of the PSC meeting included:

- agreement on the role of the PSC;
- endorsement of the 1st year workplan;
- approval of implementation processes such as recruitment of Director, hosting of CP, etc;
- agreement on the need for CP policies in key areas such as partnership development.

At this time, the CP has donor commitments of US\$3M from the World Bank (half of which is subject to provision of a satisfactory workplan for Year 1), and €4.15M from the EC. There are a number of other potential sources of resources that will be pursued in the next few months.

In August-September 2004, the CP will be reviewed and key criteria will be: resource mobilization; development of partnerships; clear indication of outputs- even at this early stage; and, evidence of an operational governance and management system in place.

What have we learned along the way?

Process

1. The manner in which the CP concept was developed and approved for further consideration represents both an opportunity and a challenge. Without a long history of prior collaboration in this area of work, there has been an opportunity to build a program from the beginnings. The counter to this is that the lack of a history of working together has necessitated much more effort towards building confidence among partners and ensuring transparency of process.
2. The broadening of partnerships has been important to the CP; in doing so however, it is vital that all CP participants have a common understanding of the CP and a common vision for what it can achieve. This is both at the technical and the political levels.
3. Transparency- the CP suffered a little from its initial beginnings- the involvement of various centres and institutes and the apparent exclusion of others hindered early development. We hope that this has been mostly overcome and continue to strive for greater engagement and transparency.
4. The amount of time and effort to establish a multi-partner consortium such as this CP was seriously under-estimated. It sometimes seems like a very thankless task to lead the development of a CP and there are more than enough observers who are willing to point out where the faults are!

Science

5. The subject area of the CP, at the 'heartland' of the CGIAR as many put it, also represents opportunities and challenges. The CGIAR centres have extensive genetic resource collections however, the use of these resources for crop improvement programs using modern tools of biotechnology (*unlocking genetic diversity*) has been fragmented. It is imperative that the CGIAR centres, with their modest resources, work together and in partnership with other institutions, such as NARS, ARIs and the private sector, to fully utilise the potential of the genebanks. In the process, the redirection of unrestricted funding to this CP has created a competitive environment so we are faced with "competition" not "collaboration".

6. Rigorous scientific review by independent reviewers is essential. The process and aims of the review must be clearly understood by all project proponents and the reviewers should be selected on the basis of their ability to assess projects that contribute to the goals of the CP.
7. The CP will inevitably face up to challenges associated with the public perception of biotechnology.
8. There is a view amongst some that this CP is technology driven. There is nothing wrong with using science to advance the development of both 'major' and 'minor' crops to meet the needs of resource-poor farmers but, never-the-less, we need to show the link between science and its relevant application.
9. The excitement that has been generated among scientists who look forward to the comparative biology approach of the CP is undeniable; hopefully a similar level of enthusiasm will be generated among donors. During the early phases of developing the proposal we focused on the science and not adequately on the business plan.

Governance

10. Good leadership is important- CIMMYT, IPGRI and IRRI have combined to provide leadership in the development of the CP; this role has been enhanced as trust has developed. There is always room for improvement!
11. The partners in the CP must be compatible and complementary; all should have a clearly defined role and provide important contributions to the output of the CP. Partners should come into the CP thinking what they can provide not what they expect to get out of it.
12. Institutional support is necessary at all levels; support for scientists attending meetings, support to the governance and management and advocacy on behalf of the CP within the respective institutions. This CP has found it to be very beneficial to conduct meetings at the sites of partners.
13. The appointment of a Director is probably the single most important decision for the CP.

Resources

14. Private sector interactions- there is potential for significant interactions with the private sector and discussions have commenced with the CGIAR Private Sector Committee who have also nominated a contact person, W Niebur of Pioneer. Notwithstanding the overall willingness for cooperation it is unlikely to occur until there are specific project proposals. Early contributions that are being considered are more likely to take the form of proprietary technologies and other types of in-kind support.

15. All CPs are facing challenges in fund raising. It is clear that the early expectations of new and additional funds were optimistic. The reality is a mixture of redirected and some new funding. Identifying the latter will be a challenge.
16. The CP is observing the experiences of the other two CPs especially, in regard to competitive grants programs. There have also been discussions with HarvestPlus (Biofortification) on the possibility of some joint work.

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