

HarvestPlus (Biofortification Challenge Program): Lessons Learned

1. Resources and Time for Planning and Executing the Full Start-Up of Individual Challenge Programs Are Essential (a minimum of 12 months)

The Biofortification Challenge Program (now called HarvestPlus) was approved in October, 2002. World Bank funding of \$3 million for 2003 was made available in December, 2002. Full start-up of the project is envisioned in January, 2004.

2003 has been a year of fund raising, setting project staff and administrative structures in place, and organizing planning meetings amongst collaborating organizations.

Renewed contacts with the Gates Foundation were initiated in January, 2003 based on the outcome of the October, 2002 AGM. Submission of the proposal to the Gates Foundation, revisions, and approval proceeded relatively quickly. Funds are available (the first tranche of \$7 million) to be spent beginning in January, 2004. Submission of the external reviews commissioned by the interim Science Council (iSC) and iSC comments speeded up the process by obviating the need for the Gates Foundation to seek their own external reviews. Discussions continue with a number of additional donors in the hope of meeting the proposal target budget of \$12.5 million per year over the first four years.

The Program Director was selected in March, 2003. The administrative coordinator began work in June, the communications coordinator began work in August and the nutrition coordinator was selected in September to begin work in January, 2004. Two more 'core' positions are yet to be filled (breeding coordinator and impact/policy coordinator).

Nine interdisciplinary planning meetings (to develop workplans and modes of interacting) were conducted during June through mid-October (a project-wide meeting in June, meetings for each of the six Phase 1 crops, and two technical meetings, one on impact analysis (primarily economists and other social scientists) and one on nutritional breeding objectives (primarily human nutritionists).

A first Project Advisory Committee (PAC) meeting was held in March to initiate/approve the selection of the Program Director and to set up/approve initial operating procedures and initial project activities for 2003. The approved procedures included standard terms of contracts for work to be undertaken by collaborating partners in the joint venture. The operating Budget for 2003 was also approved. Thus the Management team was empowered to move ahead swiftly during 2003. A second PAC meeting will be held in November to discuss/approve the workplans developed for 2004, coming out of the various planning meetings.

The initial approval process and World Bank funding served two essential purposes. It provided the resources necessary for the planning and start-up activities described

above. The PAC endorsement of plans provided the management team with the necessary authority to proceed to detailed discussions with potential new donors .

The fact that much smaller precursor projects (e.g. the CGIAR Micronutrients Project) were already in place and have provided experience/lessons in inter-disciplinary collaboration and communication, has (i) facilitated productive outcomes at the planning meetings and (ii) provided a means for efficient use of a part of the World Bank funds for 2003 for continuation of ongoing activities (eg. breeding, germplasm screening, nutrition studies) even as the collaborating organizations prepare for scaling up of activities in 2004.

For Challenge Programs which are just starting from scratch in terms of actual operation and collaborator interactions, this initial start-up period might have to be extended beyond 12 months. For HarvestPlus, specialized internal communications software is yet to be set up. Some communications tools (e.g. a preliminary website and brochures) have been developed.

It is important that the momentum to fully fund the remainder of the Program is maintained and to show that the bold initiative taken by a new major donor, a non CGIAR member, is matched by other donor sources.

2. There are Some Incompatibilities Between Competitive Bidding and Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Interdisciplinary exchange/communication is crucial for the success of HarvestPlus. Such interactions become increasingly productive as experience is gained, that is over time and at a series of meetings. HarvestPlus has some advantage that experience was gained by a subset of the collaborating institutions in precursor projects, but many new non –CGIAR collaborators have participated in the planning meetings in 2003. To motivate true collaboration, it is important that the collaborating institutions share a common set of shared goals/objectives which must be jointly discussed and agreed upon. Understanding across disciplines is hindered by technical language which is either are not commonly understood, or has different connotations to different disciplines. These barriers must be surmounted. This all takes time and the give and take of interacting on repeated occasions.

The optimal situation in terms of team building is one in which the partner institutions are all known at the start of the planning process. Competitive bidding can hinder this process of team-building in three ways. First, if one does not know that his/her proposal will be selected, either he/she will be more reluctant to fully buy into the planning process, or may not have been invited to participate in the planning process at all. Second, a winning bidder has agreed to undertake a specific activity. Challenge Programs must be flexible as ongoing research and external circumstances dictate changes in overall plans. Unless fully integrated into a culture of teamwork, the winning bidder may be reticent to alter the terms of reference of the winning bid, which may have taken quite a substantial amount of work to prepare. Third, it is usually expected that

competitive bids will be decided only on the basis of technical competence, perhaps also with a value placed on capacity building. However, ability/willingness to collaborate across disciplinary boundaries is essential and difficult to assess in evaluating formal proposals.

3. Distributed Decision-Making Power

Building consensus among collaborating institutions is key to the success of HarvestPlus. The Program Director reports to (i) a Project Advisory Committee which has ultimate decision-making power over workplans and budgets, as well as the Directors-General of CIAT and IFPRI. Such a structure inherently forces consensus-building. Nevertheless, consensus-building requires considerable transactions costs.

4. Outreach to the Public

We took the decision to change the name of the Biofortification Challenge Program to HarvestPlus as a way to reach out more effectively to the public. We felt that this was important in terms of (i) sustaining donor support for a 10-year program, (ii) defending/explaining controversial activities related to development of transgenic crops, and (iii) meeting one of the goals of the Challenge Programs to raise the public profile of the Future Harvest Centers. Not everyone agreed with the decision; several scientists were reticent to use such an 'imprecise' title. However, the decision-making process was highly participatory, the decision approved by a large majority, and accepted and behind us. Time will tell whether this name will serve us better in meeting the three objectives above. The lesson learned so far is that such a name change can be accomplished.