

Collective Communications in the CGIAR: A Short History of a Longstanding Endeavor

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Far-reaching institutional reforms in the CGIAR, which should be in place by 2010, are expected to result in a more collective approach to international agricultural research. This, in turn, should better enable the CGIAR to develop coherent messages on major issues, such as climate change, and share them more effectively through a better coordinated approach, making international agricultural research more visible and influential in key international fora. For communications professionals in the CGIAR, those changes could represent an important new opportunity to strengthen our joint work and heighten its effectiveness.

Various CGIAR-supported Centers have amassed a strong record of outstanding individual achievements in communications. But we also have a long and productive history of collective effort, which has usefully complemented the work of particular Centers, while advancing the mission of the CGIAR as a whole. As the new reforms unfold, it is important that we reflect on collective communications efforts of the past and draw lessons from these, so they can inform future endeavors and perhaps enhance the likelihood of their success.

This document attempts to aid that process by providing a brief summary of collective communications in the CGIAR over the last two decades and by sharing a few ideas gleaned from that experience.

Key Developments

- The Public Awareness Association (PAA) was established in 1988, as it began to dawn on Center staff that they would no longer be able to count on steadily increasing “core” funding for Center research. The CGIAR’s traditionally low profile came to be viewed as a serious liability in terms of resource mobilization.
- Another compelling motive for establishing the PAA was the negative publicity that some Centers were starting to receive: IBPGR (now Bioversity International), for example, in relation to the controversy surrounding the collection, conservation and use of plant genetic resources in the development of modern crop varieties.
- Ed Sulzberger, who worked in communications for several international Centers as well as the CGIAR Secretariat, was an early advocate of the PAA. The main idea behind it was that, since Center communicators (mostly science writers and editors) were somewhat isolated and generally short on public awareness expertise, they needed to help one another and start building capacity in this area.

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- The PAA was initially chaired by a donor representative (Frank Karel, vice president of communications at the Rockefeller Foundation). The CGIAR's longstanding partnership with Burness Communications, a US-based public relations firm, dates back to this time. Its president, Andy Burness, is a close associate of Karel's.
- Several years after the PAA's creation, the Public Awareness and Resources Committee (PARC) was established by the Committee of Center Directors General (a predecessor of the Alliance of CGIAR Centers), in order to provide the PAA with clearer direction.
- Meeting twice a year (at the Mid-Term Meeting and Centers' Week), PARC requested that PAA undertake specific tasks (e.g., CGIAR representation at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro), while the PAA brought key public awareness issues to the attention of PARC, which reported on its activities to CGIAR membership at these meetings. PARC also identified major issues, such as donors at risk, and asked the PAA to intervene (e.g., through a year-long media campaign in Germany).
- Under the chairmanship of a succession of Center DGs (e.g., Per Pinstrup-Andersen, Geoff Hawtin, Hubert Zandstra and Willy Dar), PARC was highly supportive of the PAA and relied heavily on it for professional advice. The PAA was chaired by heads of communication at various Centers over the years, including Tiff Harris at CIMMYT, Ruth Raymond at Bioversity, Helen Leitch at WorldFish and Klaus von Grebmer at IFPRI.
- The 1990s were a tough time for communicators in the CGIAR. Donor support for agriculture waned, and so did media interest, making it difficult to get major coverage for agricultural stories. Australian science journalist Julian Cribb proposed to the PAA a novel solution, namely that Center communicators could draw more attention to agriculture by pointing out its close links with high-profile issues, such as health, the environment and conflict. Cribb also emphasized the need for the CGIAR to adopt a new and more appealing brand.
- In response to these ideas, the Future Harvest (FH) organization was established in 1998, with full support from PARC, under the leadership of Barbara Rose, formerly head of communications at IFPRI.
- Future Harvest commissioned a series of studies by non-CGIAR organizations on the links between agriculture and other development issues, and then heavily promoted study results with the media. It also created an attractive Web site and made this into a focal point for CGIAR news stories emphasizing the wide relevance of agriculture research.

- In developing and promoting press materials, Future Harvest worked closely with Centers through the Story Development Initiative, led by Ed Sulzberger, and relied heavily on Burness Communications.
- In addition, Future Harvest began exploring various nontraditional approaches to funding raising, such as social marketing, and began cultivating relationships with "Future Harvest Ambassadors," who included Jimmy Carter, Desmond Tutu, Mohammed Yunus and Queen Noor of Jordan, among others.
- At the same time, the organization embarked on an initiative to rebrand the CGIAR as Future Harvest. Initially, the change was well received by donors and Centers. Detailed instructions were prepared for handling of the new brand in Center publications, and these were widely adopted but not to the exclusion of the CGIAR brand. For a few years, starting in the late 1990s, the two were used side by side.
- Another development in the 1990s that had important implications for collective communications was the creation of CGIAR Systemwide and Ecoregional Programs (SWEPs), which eventually came to number 15. Though coordinated by a single Center, each SWEP involves various Centers as well as numerous national partners. Communications for SWEPs are generally handled by the coordinating Center.
- In 2002, the PAA agreed at a meeting in Rome to merge with the resource mobilization network and adopt the name Marketing Group. The group devised a new strategy with several innovations, such as outreach to parliamentarians and targeted efforts to shore up support from specific donors.
- Future Harvest began to go awry a few years later, as implementation of CGIAR governance reforms got under way. New CGIAR leadership and some donors opposed the Future Harvest brand and approach.
- A review of Future Harvest actually proposed that it be revitalized and shift its focus more to fund raising. PARC and the Future Harvest Board were merged. Nonetheless, opposition on the part of CGIAR leadership hardened, with the result that Future Harvest was discontinued and its board disbanded.
- Meanwhile, the Marketing Group had been recognized as an inter-Center working group, reporting to the directors general and their deputies. But in the absence of strong leadership from senior management and serious interest in collective communications, the Marketing Group lost direction somewhat, and interest in its initiatives went into decline.
- The communications team of the CGIAR Secretariat, under the leadership of Fionna Douglas, has worked closely with the Marketing Group in recent years but eventually took over its responsibilities and now coordinates CGIAR

representation in major events, theme-based communications campaigns, parliamentary outreach with World Bank support and renewed joint efforts in media outreach, with strong support from Burness Communications.

Insights, Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Listed below are some views we believe are supported by the CGIAR's two decades of experience with collective communications. We look forward to discussing these ideas with others during the March 2009 communications workshop (to be held at the WorldFish Center in Malaysia) and to exploring their relevance for future communications in the CGIAR.

- The PAA's original views about the close connection between donor support and public awareness are more valid now than ever and justify strong public awareness efforts in a reformed CGIAR.
- The PAA's collegial relationship with PARC was essential to the effectiveness of early collective communications in the CGIAR, because it guaranteed clear leadership and adequate support for these efforts. In the new CGIAR, a similarly close relationship should be fostered between communications professionals and management at the highest level.
- With its emphasis on mutual support and capacity building, the PAA not only fostered collective communications in the CGIAR but also added considerable value to the communications activities of Centers individually. In the new CGIAR, such activities will remain important and can continue to benefit from collective support.
- Though largely helpful and beneficial, the PAA was hardly flawless. One of its ever-present problems was that of "free riders." In other words, the bulk of the work was done by a few committed Center communicators, while others, for various reasons, did relatively little while still receiving benefits. This problem is perhaps inevitable in any collective undertaking, but it can probably be diminished by creating stronger incentives for active participation (e.g., including contributions to collective communications in performance appraisals).
- The SWEPS were an important innovation in CGIAR collective action, and it would be worthwhile to examine their communications activities more closely to see what lessons can be learned, which might be relevant to the new mega-programs. This analysis could perhaps focus on the five SWEPS found to be most effective by a recent review carried out by the CGIAR Science Council: that is, CAC, CAPri, RWC, SGRP and SLP.²

² Sustainable Agricultural Development in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Collective Action and Property Rights, Rice-Wheat Research Consortium, Systemwide Genetic Resources Program and Systemwide Livestock Program.

- The Marketing Group's effort to strengthen ties between communications and resource mobilization professionals did not succeed, though the arguments for doing so remain compelling. Nonetheless, failure to successfully wed the two had much to do with the downfall of Future Harvest, which in turn undermined the Marketing Group. New CGIAR reforms and corresponding changes in communications offer an important opportunity to revisit this issue.
- The Future Harvest approach of underlining agriculture's relevance to key development issues was quite valid, as borne out by its success in generating media coverage. Arguably, the approach has become even more important, as new issues, such as climate change, have emerged. In the new CGIAR, theme-based communications campaigns should be intensified, perhaps in close connection with the new mega-programs.
- The reasons behind the failed attempt of Future Harvest to rebrand the CGIAR should be given careful consideration to determine what went wrong and why before any new attempt at rebranding is undertaken.