

Science Council of the CGIAR

Commentary on the Third EPMR of the World Agroforestry Center (ICRAF)

April 24th, 2006

The Report of the Third EPMR of ICRAF was discussed at the Fifth Meeting of the SC (April 10-12, 2006) in the presence of Panel Member, Dr. Chris Harwood (on behalf of Prof. Jeffery Burley, Panel Chair, who was unavailable due to illness), the Chair of ICRAF's Board of Trustees, Dr. Eugene Terry, and the Director General of ICRAF, Dr. Dennis Garrity. The SC thanks the Panel Chair and Members for a constructive, frank and thorough report offering a clear overview and assessment of ICRAF's research, management and governance. The Panel clearly recognizes the seminal contributions ICRAF has made to defining and advancing the science of agroforestry and the importance to the CGIAR of developing and implementing a strategic vision for systems-based integrated natural resources management (INRM) that fully involves both the biophysical and social sciences.

The Panel notes, in particular, that the Center undertook nine CCERs in the intervening seven years, including four in 2005 alone, and that the Panel carefully reviewed each of these. In response to the 2nd EPMR (1998), the Center developed a new strategy document in 2000, has monitored and adapted its organizational arrangements to address its updated strategy, reorganizing programs and integrating the research and development-support aspects of its agenda within each global theme in 2003, ultimately leading to a new Vision and Strategic Planning Framework adopted in 2005. The Panel endorses ICRAF's vision, mission and goals and found them well-aligned with the new System priorities. Indeed, the Panel confirms that "ICRAF is well positioned to address the new CGIAR priorities...and can contribute to each of the five CGIAR system priority areas".

The Report of the 3rd EPMR makes 15 constructive recommendations: 2 concerning strategic research priorities, 4 on Regions and Systemwide programs, 6 on Governance and Management, and 3 on internal organizational changes. The EPMR Report offers as well 43 detailed suggestions for the Center and its Board to consider. The SC fully endorses all 15 recommendations. It is pleased to note that ICRAF agrees with and is already moving to implement 11 of these, and that it is committed to further analyzing in detail the remaining 4 recommendations. Given the nature of the recommendations and concerns these raise, the SC recommends that a smaller-scale, focused review be

undertaken in 12 months' time of ICRAF's progress in addressing 4 of these recommendations, as enumerated below.

Strategic Research Direction and Focus

The most fundamental issue raised by the Panel concerns ICRAF's strategic research direction and focus. The Panel reports in detail on and repeatedly commends the Center and its scientists for the substance, salience, and quality of past and recent scientific work in each of the four global themes. The usual lagging indicators of scientific productivity – publications, international recognition of scientists and research impact, etc. – are strong across all four Center themes. But the Panel expresses concern – expressed to it by Center scientists and partners – about “dilution of research staff across an expanding base of projects” and a research agenda “increasingly driven by donors who are focused on national development agendas that tend to fragment and diffuse research”. There is no clear set of processes in place to ensure research quality is adequately addressed. The crucial distinction is between strong, precise indicators of high quality past work and worrying, impressionistic but widespread signals that “ICRAF is drifting more towards development across a vast geographic landscape at the expense of high quality research that is necessary for the science of agroforestry to advance.” The Panel emphasized the forward-looking concerns in its summary and cover letter, while the Center focused on the backward-looking indicators of excellence. Hence the apparent disjuncture between the two.

While commending the Center for its past performance, the SC strongly agrees with the Panel's recommendation that ICRAF “consolidates its strategic research priorities into a long-term workable strategic plan that directs more effort towards a small number of relevant, emerging research topics” and that the Center “ensure that projects with restricted funds be aligned with ICRAF's strategic research goals” (recommendations 1 and 2). The Center needs to guard against scarce unrestricted resources being unnecessarily sapped in supporting partners' development initiatives that do not coincide fully with ICRAF's strategic vision for agroforestry research.

The SC notes and endorses the Panel's concern that the Center's continued success depends fundamentally on retaining its pre-eminence in scientific research and that this requires more vigilant focus on generating international public goods (IPGs). The Center runs an undesirable risk over the coming few years of spreading its scientists too thinly on a large number of small and geographically dispersed development projects for them to develop and sustain the strategic research capacity that is essential if ICRAF is to maintain the performance standards it previously established in agroforestry. The Panel's observations thus reinforce concerns the SC expressed in its commentary on the Center's 2006-8 Medium Term Plan. The Center needs to clearly identify the IPGs it aims to develop in the next few years and the means by which it will prioritize among, vet and review candidate research projects. The Panel identifies a number of emerging

strategic research topics of considerable promise that merit more investment and offers several useful, specific suggestions of scientific activities that would usefully consolidate and reinforce the gains from recent ICRAF research discoveries and clear extensions. The SC notes that the Center agrees with the need to focus on a smaller number of emerging research issues for long-term impact.

Regions and Systemwide Programs

The Panel expresses concern that a Center with annual unrestricted funding of approximately \$8 million has 30-45 field offices in as many as 24 different countries. As a result, too much scarce unrestricted funding is spent on infrastructure and support, while the demands placed on senior scientists by coordination across such a far-flung enterprise have a high opportunity cost in terms of foregone time spent on the scientific advances that have historically been ICRAF's hallmark. Cross-regional synthesis is being crowded out, it seems, by excessive replication across distinct locales. The Panel therefore offers several recommendations (especially #s 3, 4 and 15) intended to address this structural imbalance by consolidating operations in specific Regions and scaling back its presence in other Regions. The Center recognizes the need to concentrate unrestricted resources on strategic scientific research by promptly and carefully reconsidering the breadth of its geographic engagements. SC shares this concern and fully endorses these recommendations.

ICRAF hosts two Systemwide Programs: Alternatives to Slash and Burn (ASB) and the African Highlands Initiative (AHI). ASB recently underwent a very favorable review and the Panel recommends ICRAF maintain its role in ASB and strengthen the capacity developed in ASB. The SC agrees and is pleased that the Center likewise concurs. The Panel likewise recommends, and the Center agrees, that the CGIAR commission an external review of AHI in conjunction with ASARECA in order to address the questions raised by the Panel and make recommendations as to what role ICRAF should play in AHI going forward. The SC concurs with the Panel's recommendation and accordingly plans to commission an external review of AHI.

Partnerships and Capacity Building

The Center has fully integrated capacity strengthening into most of its research projects and has emphasized the establishment of partner networks for scaling up agroforestry science and dissemination of technologies. It has made especially noteworthy past investments in strengthening tertiary education capacity through agroforestry curriculum development and staff training, investments that lay the groundwork for productive partnerships and the multiplication of scientific advances in agroforestry, a relatively new discipline. The Panel recognizes the commendable breadth and innovativeness of ICRAF's partnerships with NARS, the private sector, NGOs and educational institutions in multiple regions. The SC commends these accomplishments.

The SC nonetheless cautions the Center that partnerships need to support, not drive, strategic research programs. While the Panel appropriately notes there exist considerable IPG generation opportunities in research on effective methodologies for scaling-up, it must be borne in mind that the act of scaling-up may not of itself represent an IPG unless it is aimed at the generation of international spillovers. The Center seems to have lost sight of this subtle but essential distinction, perhaps in part at the encouragement of donors eager to fund local-level scaling up of especially promising discoveries in order to generate demonstrable impact. The SC urges ICRAF to consider carefully its complementary advantage so as to maximize the synergies and multiplicative effects from interactions with its partners positioned elsewhere along the research for development continuum, and to ensure that adequate controlled experimentation has been done to verify the superiority of agroforestry technology options prior to any scaling up. Moreover, the SC is concerned by the Panel's observation that the Center has "alienated some [partner institutions] because of its dominant approach." ICRAF seems at risk, in some locations, of losing track of its comparative advantage in scientific research and thereby inadvertently crowding out national- and local-level research and development partners by becoming too directly engaged in downstream activities. The SC gratefully notes that the Center acknowledges this, is concerned about such possible unintended effects and seeks to address this issue, where it applies.

The Panel finds the current collaboration between ICRAF and CIFOR appropriate and does not believe a full merger of the two Centers would be appropriate. The SC would have liked to have received from the Panel a more detailed analysis of ICRAF's programmatic and science-based linkages with CIFOR. In addition, as ILRI and ICRAF develop a joint MTP for Eastern and Southern Africa this year for the first time, SC expects the Centers to devote more attention to this issue.

Management and Governance

The Panel notes ICRAF's prudent financial management practices in an increasingly difficult and uncertain funding environment. SC commends ICRAF for having maintained excellent financial health. The SC is concerned, however, that ICRAF now has the highest ratio of restricted to unrestricted funding of any Center in the System, at 70:30 (and rising), versus a Systemwide average of 56:44 in 2004. This unbalanced funding structure poses real risks to the Center, especially so long as the Center fails to practice full cost recovery on projects based on restricted funding. The Panel reports that total project restricted funding yielded less than 13% indirect cost recovery in 2004, compared to ICRAF's audited and published overhead rate of 22%. The Panel cautions that "this is not a sustainable funding structure for the mid- to long term. Continuing business as usual is not a viable option." The SC agrees.

The Panel also expresses concerns regarding a few other governance and management issues, especially about serious dysfunction at the Center in human resources management, but also concerning management processes more generally. It offers several recommendations (#s 10, 11 and 12) in this area. The SC urges the Center to move swiftly and decisively in addressing these issues.

The Panel identifies important questions concerning the matrix management approach taken by the Center, in particular whether, in practice, this leads to more effective management systems and greater strategic research coherence. The SC notes that this issue applies, to varying degrees, to each of the Centers reviewed in the current round of EPMRs. This issue therefore seems to merit more in-depth exploration by the CGIAR as a System-wide management issue.

Follow-Up Review Recommendation

The Panel notes that ICRAF has implemented all of the 10 recommendations and taken constructive action on all 17 suggestions from the 2nd EPMR, conducted in 1998. The SC commends the Center for its constructive and thorough response to past feedback and takes this as a strong indication of ICRAF's commitment to fully internalize the most recent round of recommendations and suggestions.

In light of the Panel's recommendations, the Center's response and the SC's substantive concerns, the SC recommends that ICRAF prepares by May 2007 an operational strategy taking into account EPMR recommendations and suggestions and that the SC commission a two-person follow-up review to be undertaken 12 months from now to assess ICRAF's progress in addressing the following four recommendations (quoting directly, the full Panel recommendation):

- “#1: ICRAF consolidates its strategic research priorities into a long-term workable strategic plan that directs more effort towards a small number of relevant emerging research topics”;
- “#2: an analysis be undertaken of the likely impacts of involvement in large development projects, including the Millennium Villages Project, on ICRAF's overall balance between research and development, staff commitments and administrative costs; it is also important to ensure that projects with restricted funds be aligned with ICRAF's strategic research goals”;
- “#10: ICRAF engages the services of an independent, appropriately qualified and experienced management consultant to work with the three most senior levels of management to clarify and strengthen their respective roles and responsibilities, and to establish appropriate managerial processes and decision making rules”;
- and
- “#11: ICRAF urgently recruits a fully qualified and thoroughly experienced professional Human Resources manager whose training and experience cover

the entire spectrum of HR services, including not only staff management and staff development but also compensation and benefits.”

This follow-up review would evaluate the appropriateness and impact of the Center’s short-term responses to these recommendations in particular, including its operational strategy.