

Science Council of the CGIAR

Commentary to the 2nd EPMR of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)

May, 2006

The Report of the Second External Program and Management Review (EPMR) of CIFOR was discussed at the Fifth Meeting of the Science Council (SC), held at WARDA, Cotonou, Benin, in the presence of Panel Chair, Dr. Niels Elers Koch, and the Director General of CIFOR, Dr. David Kaimowitz. The SC thanks the Panel Chair and Members for the report, which gives a very positive account of CIFOR's international credibility. The SC notes that the Review has found the Center to be a leading International Forestry Research Center and, as just one example, highlighted the excellent program in the communication of science to major stakeholders. The SC endorses these overall findings.

The report is very positive about the achievements of the research programs and the overall quality of the Center. The SC believes this to be a reasonable and valid assertion and congratulates the Center. However the SC would have liked to have seen more analytical evidence by the Panel for this conclusion; specifically on the types of outputs produced and on the measure of outcomes and impact. The Panel suggests that the outcomes from the research of CIFOR are different to most other centers in the CGIAR and are difficult to assess. The SC acknowledges that there are methodological issues for assessing impact on the CGIAR targets from policy research (the predominance of CIFOR agenda) but the SC's view is that in this (i.e. policy research), CIFOR is not unique. A more thorough analysis and documentation of the many achievements of the Center (based for instance in CIFOR's document "*Achievements of CIFOR 1998-2005*" where recent impacts are reported as mentioned by the Panel) would in the view of the SC been helpful to the Center both for the recognition of those achievements since the last EPMR and as a more rigorous platform from which to develop the strategy for the future.

The Report has 17 recommendations, which for the most part are relevant, feasible to be implemented, and helpful for the Center to improve its performance even further. It seems that in very few areas if any, the Panel has observed such shortcomings that a dramatic change would be needed by the Center- the recommendations rather enforce action that the Center has already identified as deeming attention, which is reflected in the Center's response. Thus the SC finds the recommendations 1-11, 15, and 16 very relevant to the Center's future where implementation is necessary. These deal mainly with priorities and strategy, science quality and relevance, research management, and data management and ownership; some of these are dealt in more depth below. There are other recommendations that in the view of the SC do not have the same or near the same level of importance, nor are they as useful to the Center as are some of the many suggestions in the report. For example the SC questions if it is effective to expect CIFOR to report implementation of something where it is already doing better than other Centers (Recommendation 12 on attracting

women candidates to apply for posts), or has limited chances to influence the situation (Recommendation 14 on influencing the funding environment in the CGIAR).

Because, in the SC view the report contains additional insights in the suggestions and in the context of the full report, the SC has sought in this commentary to draw out these additional issues and highlight them along with the most important recommendations.

Priorities and Strategy

Four important recommendations by the Panel deal with the urgency to develop a strategic plan (Recommendation 1), including a sound priority setting process (Recommendation 2) and resource allocation (Recommendation 3) and a clear definition of program objectives (Recommendation 4). Without these the report suggests/eludes that the Center could lose focus in a number of important areas: development vs. research, policy vs. ecological research, regional focus, IPGs vs. local goods. While the SC found the report somewhat vague and inconsistent in the analysis of these issues for example in discussion of the ad hoc approach to priority setting among the programs, the use of restricted/ donor driven funds and its effect on IPG research vs. development activity - the SC endorses the recommendations and the critical nature of them - they are central to the key question on the quality and relevance of the science. The SC notes that the recommendation on the strategy is almost the same as from the 1st CIFOR EPMR and is pleased to note the urgency with which the board will now act to develop a new strategic plan in 2006, when the new DG is on board. The SC therefore requests that the Center includes in the MTP to be submitted by June 2007 a detailed analysis of the proposed changes from the old to the new strategy and how these are going to be implemented

Science Quality and Relevance

The SC endorses the recommendation by the Panel to increase the effort for publication of landmark articles in high impact journals used by the global science community (Recommendation 8). However, the Council notes that the CGIAR Performance Measurement Publication Indicators for 2005 show an increase in the number of CIFOR's peer-reviewed publications, having the Center the highest number of publications per scientist per year in the CGIAR (3.37).

The SC also notes in the report some concern about the numbers of regions (5) in the region x thematic matrix, which may compromise scientific focus and lessen interaction across disciplines. The SC notes that a regional matrix system is common to several Centers reviewed in 2006 and in all the Centers concerns were raised about the potential loss of focus on IPG research and on the loss in integration across disciplines (which is the main source of high quality, land mark journal publications) inherent in an over-extended regional matrix system. It is important that these potential high transactions costs do not overwhelm the task of integration at the discipline levels. Thus the SC encourages CIFOR, like other Centers, to think carefully about the optimal number of regional offices and the core scientific staff needed in each in the context of focusing on a clear mandate for generating good quality science capable of generating mission-relevant IPGs. The SC concurs with the Panel about the need for greater clarity in the role of the regional centers (Recommendation 15) and for

the Center to identify a smaller set of science based priorities on which it keeps a tight focus and for which the Center will be well recognised by its science peers.

The SC also wishes to underscore the Panel recommendation on research programs (Recommendation 7). In the view of the SC such programs are yet to be fully implemented in many centers yet they are increasingly important in a modern research center based on shorter term funding, collaborative partnerships and mobile staff.

Balance in research focus

The report highlights the strong outcome from the policy research and advocacy over the last few years. The SC endorses this very important achievement. The report also mentions a need for the correct strategic balance among policy and NRM research and advocacy. The SC suggests that CIFOR, while developing its new strategic plan and prioritizing its core research strengths in ecology and policy, expands on identifying an adequate balance between forestry science, policy research and advocacy. This analysis is particularly important to the Center and the CGIAR at large since CIFOR is recognized as playing a leading role in NRM research for the CGIAR system.

Overall the SC endorses the Panel's main recommendations and, as indicated by the Center's response, these will be taken up and contribute to even greater achievements over the next review period. Notwithstanding the overall positive nature of the review, the SC believes that the report would have benefited the Center more by having more in depth analysis behind the recommendations and in few instances more clarity between the recommendations and the context within the main body of the report. Thus this commentary by the SC has endeavored to comment not only on the recommendations but also on some of the additional information embedded in the full report, which we deem useful for the Center. In conclusion, although the Council sees some deficiencies in the analytical evidence presented in the report, the SC agrees that it meets the requirements for an EPMR.

Finally, the SC looks forward to seeing responses to the Panel's observations in the 2008-2010 MTP (June 2007 submission), particularly as it relates to: a new strategy; the balance among ecology, policy research and advocacy; key scientific research focus; perhaps fewer regional nodes; and the Center's plans to enhance its presence as the pre-eminent international forestry research Institute.