

Science Council of the CGIAR

Commentary on the Third EPMR of the WorldFish Center

April 24th, 2006

The Report of the Third EPMR of WorldFish was discussed at the Fifth Meeting of the SC (April 10-12, 2006) in the presence of Panel Chair, Dr. Benedict Satia, the Director General of WorldFish, Dr. Stephen Hall (through video-conference) and the Center's Deputy Director General for Research, Patrick Dugan. The SC thanks Dr. Satia and his team for a thorough and comprehensive review of the Center. The SC endorses all 15 Panel recommendations and notes, for the most part, that the Center Board and Management have as well. The SC found many other valuable suggestions throughout the body of the text and encourages the Center to consider all of these seriously. WorldFish moved from its previous location in the Philippines to its current location in Penang, Malaysia in 2000. The Panel finds the Center still in a transitional phase, and accordingly makes a number of key recommendations aimed at completing this transition in the near future. Overall, the SC was pleased by the Panel's assurance that donors' funds had been well invested and that the future for the Center was bright, though challenging.

The Panel identified a number of major achievements of the Center since the last Review. These include the worldwide successful transfer of the GIFT, the strengthening and expansion of INGA, the development and application of methodologies and technologies for integrated aquaculture-agriculture (IAA) and rice field based aquaculture, the production of *Bayfish* and *TrawlBase* databases and the upgrading and maintenance of other key databases such as *Fishbase* and *Reefbase*, the production of global and regional models on fisheries and aquaculture supply and demand ("Fish to 2020" co-authored with IFPRI), and the development of methodologies and guidelines on fisheries co-management. The Panel also noted positively the new strategic alliance with IWMI to share Corporate Services. Major aspects of the Center's performance that attracted the Panel's concerns involved its priorities, its science quality, its regional reach, and its focus on SSA.

Priorities and Strategy

The Panel found that the Center had not yet clearly defined its research priorities (Recommendation 3) and that its strategy does not articulate the major specific objectives to be attained over a given time period. Given the vast area of research that conceivably falls under aquaculture and fisheries research and development, as defined in Chapter 1 of the report, the SC concurs with the Panel about the need 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 Panel also found that science quality appeared mediocre when judged by publications in peer reviewed journals. The two issues, priority definition and

science quality, are by no means unrelated. It is clear that WorldFish Management is aware of and is addressing this issue with new research strategies being developed for the September 2006 Board meeting. While emphasizing he did not wish to in any way to pre-determine the strategies to be developed by the Center's Discipline Directors, the Director General identified a number of possible priority areas during his video-conference at the SC5 meeting. The SC reiterates that it is vital that WorldFish articulate soon its research niche capitalising on its comparative advantage. Partnerships with ARIs, where WorldFish is seen as the preferred research partner, will clearly be a key route to enhancing the outputs and impact of the Center, as will be filling key vacancies left by high performing scientists.

The SC is concerned that a third element -- the large numbers of regions in the region x discipline matrix may also be compromising scientific focus. WorldFish is, therefore, encouraged, 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 highlights that the changing demography of the Center's staff has important implications for research management, in particular, stressing the need for mentoring of young scientists to help them achieve the appropriate balance of time between research and knowledge transfer.

The SC was expecting to see further elaboration in the Panel's Report about the future involvement of WorldFish in the conservation of genetic resources, in line with the new CGIAR Priority 1D. SC discussion did not determine whether a modest entry into fish genetic resources research was among the priority foci that WorldFish would embrace, but as the Center is being encouraged to focus on a fewer number of priority areas and this is currently not on their agenda, it may not get the attention the SC believes it warrants.

Science Quality and Relevance

The Panel stopped short of making a recommendation about the Center's shortfall in publication output as they were satisfied that Management had satisfactorily addressed this problem through the setting of Key Performance Goals and the annual appraisal system. Top quality papers are necessary to attract the top-flight collaborators from leading ARIs that are essential to achieving WorldFish's goals. In addition, and perhaps more critically important, setting individual performance targets should be complemented by a sharpening of the scientific focus. Potential journals for publication should also be discussed at the time of experimental design. The SC does, however, agree that WorldFish scientists also need to spend some time publishing research that can be applied by their primary NARS partners.

The Panel also urged WorldFish to continue to move away from pure development projects (Recommendation 5). The SC agrees with this recommendation and is reassured by the Center's response concerning the strong complementary linkages with NARS and NGOs. It is also pleased with WorldFish's use of the 'research-for-development value chain' to identify the place on the chain whereby research could

achieve the greatest impact, but specifying where on the chain the Center should position itself for achieving its major objectives needs fuller articulation.

The SC notes the Panel drew extensively on the five CCERs conducted since the last review and therefore strongly supports the recommendation to institute rolling CCERs for each of the programs (Recommendation 13, bullet 5).

Focus on SSA

The Panel raised the concern (Recommendation 10) about the lack of critical mass and activity in SSA (compounded by the large number of regional sites discussed above) and as a consequence the probable lack of impact in the future. This was an issue raised prominently by the 2nd EPMR team and the SC is also concerned, therefore, to note again that the 3rd EPMR Panel observed that 'the accomplishments ... in no way correspond to the acclaimed importance that the Center attaches to SSA'. The SC understands that the demands for Africa are immense and that impact in Africa is difficult to achieve making the earlier observation on focus and fewer regional centers even more critical for the Center to address. The SC received assurances that the Center is indeed progressively increasing its resource commitment in the Region. The SC cautions that with a small unrestricted budget this alone cannot address the concern of overstretching with too few scientists in too many regions to conduct mission based IPG research that will make a difference in Africa. The Center is encouraged to address the issues raised earlier to maintain focus.

Governance and Management

Other issues raised by the Panel included the new matrix management system, restructuring of the Center Board and the inter-Center linkages. While understanding WorldFish's need for having separate disciplinary and regional foci, the SC nevertheless shares the Panel's concern about potentially high transaction costs and staff acceptability of the matrix (Recommendation 1). The SC was reassured by the monitoring process already in place at WorldFish. However, the SC notes that regional matrix system was 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. For example, the Panel has highlighted the need of developing a strategic research agenda from the merger of genetic resources and NRM research and to guard against a mere co-habitation of these in the new management system. The SC would encourage the Center to critically examine the implementation of its own matrix structure earlier rather than later (Recommendation 1).

Board structure and the establishment of a Scientific Advisory Committee was an issue the Panel addressed at some length (Recommendation 13). The SC was pleased to note that WorldFish had already put the required changes in place.

The SC joins the Panel in commending the proactive actions taken by WorldFish and IWMI to share Corporate Services. SC also noted the ongoing discussions between the scientists and the Boards of the two Centers and encourages further interactions that enhance the effectiveness and efficiencies of the Centers.

The SC looks forward to seeing some first responses to the Panel's observations in the 2007-2009 MTP, particularly those related to key scientific research focus, fewer regional nodes, and the Center's plans to enhance its presence and improve impact in SSA through appropriate interactions with other CGIAR Centers working in the region.