

IWMI RESPONSE TO THE THIRD EXTERNAL PROGRAM AND MANAGEMENT REVIEW OF IWMI

Introduction

IWMI much appreciates the careful and in-depth evaluation the Panel has undertaken of its work over the period under review. IWMI is pleased that the Panel's overall conclusion is that IWMI has emerged from its period of rapid growth as a larger, more diverse, more proactive and generally stronger research organization. IWMI agrees there is now an opportunity for refinement, clear specification of research questions, deeper partnerships and a focus on generating and better measuring outcomes and impacts through this larger, stronger organization.

IWMI agrees with the large majority of the Panel's recommendations and fully intends to use the Panel's careful analysis as a guide for the way forward in the years to come, starting with a new Strategic Plan exercise in 2008.

In 2007 the center is recruiting a new Director General who will be charged with the implementation of the EPMP's recommendations; first and foremost the development of a new strategic plan that will be the primary vehicle for the implementation of many of the Panel's recommendations.

The review has also raised a number of questions, however, that appear to be going further than the review of IWMI alone, but touch directly on the mission and vision for the CGIAR as a research for development system as a whole. It may be a good moment to debate, as part of the IWMI review process, the difference in perspective on what the role and purpose of a CGIAR research institute is, and how that differs from a university, and how that may require a different approach to staffing and management.

In some ways the well-thought out advice the Panel is giving IWMI is to reform itself more in the direction of a university, with disciplinary departments that favor "deep science" and where publication records dominate all else.

IWMI agrees that publications are one indicator of research quality. IWMI has instituted during the period under review a policy that sets clear expectations that every researcher generates at least 2 peer-reviewed publications every year and this is evaluated carefully as part of every researcher's performance evaluation. As a result IWMI's publication performance has improved and is currently better than at any time in its history (see Figure 1). IWMI also agrees with the Panel that there is still room for improvement and it expects to see such improvement through carefully targeted research and publication policies.

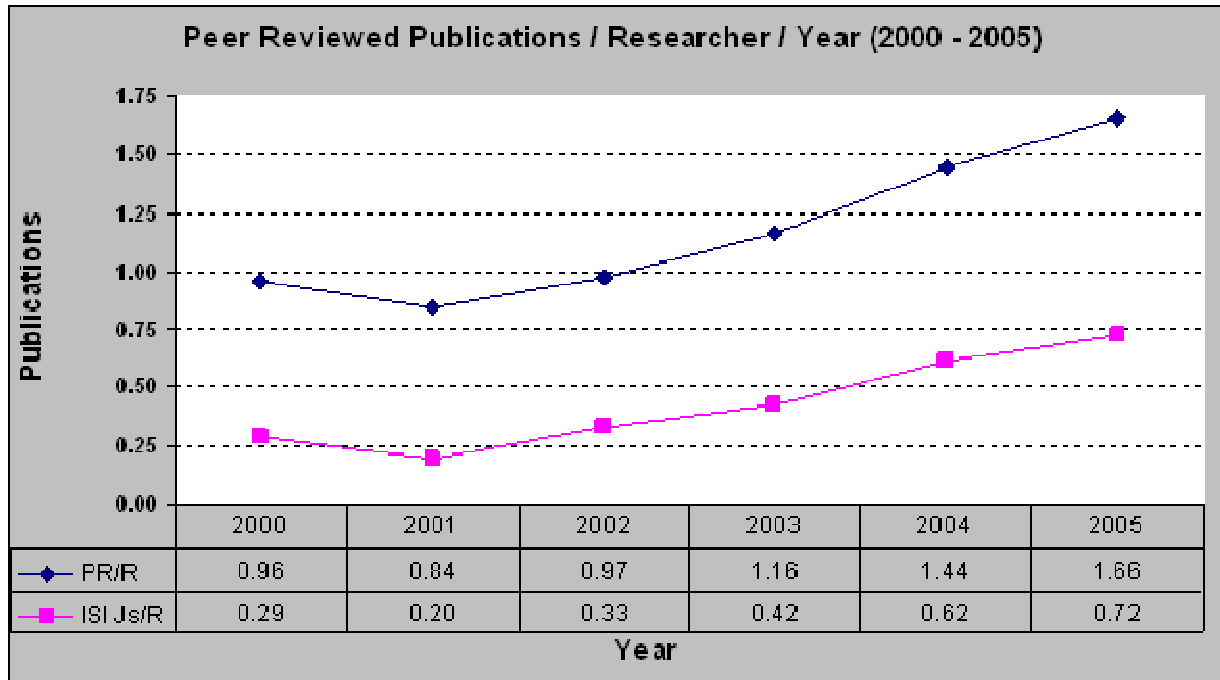


Figure 1. Peer-reviewed publications and publications in ISI-ranked journals per researcher at IWMI in the period 2000-2005.

Where IWMI disagrees with the Panel is that the publication record should not be seen as the single most important test of the quality of the individual, the performance of the institution, or the suitability of individuals to be research managers. IWMI sees the publication performance as a necessary but not sufficient condition for the more important question: does the organization have impact on the ground. Particularly, IWMI does not believe that the publication record is the key indicator to determine the quality of a research manager. Some very good researchers have shown themselves to be lousy managers; this has been widely recognized in many formal research and education institutions. IWMI has deliberately recruited a small number of people who are better people managers and understand both project management and “development”, without necessarily being well-published researchers. We also propose that making decisions about research and the impact of research is strengthened by mixing staff with managerial competence with those with research competence. We believe this is in line with management training and practice that encourages team results from the best use of individual skills from different people.

A key issue for IWMI is that it prides itself on being a multidisciplinary center; where research is formulated in terms of the problem (rather than the disciplinary research question) and where people are selected who are willing and able to look over disciplinary boundaries. In its recruitment, therefore, IWMI examines the range of experiences, both pre- and post-PhD, of its applicants and has selected several with non-standard career paths, which gives them a demonstrated edge in a multidisciplinary work and being able to relate to partners and beneficiaries of the research. This is in the midst of an era where integrated solutions to the important problems we face with water management are being encouraged

at an international level as well as locally. The Panel takes the traditional view of counting only the discipline of a researcher's PhD and their experience as years after the PhD was obtained. The reference to 'time since PhD' is also somewhat narrow culturally and reflects a standard western academic research career, i.e. the person studies and enters academia and thence builds a research-based career, whereas other degree and training schemes build on prior or parallel learning and research with the PhD being an outcome of research development, and not a ticket into research. Further, IWMI has also purposefully recruited some scientists who have taken the time to gain experience in management, or gaining wider multi-cultural understanding of the areas where they work, hence strengthening their roles and capability in a research institution; this would seem to support the Panel's emphasis on sound management, but does not follow the singular pathway that they have opted to promote and recommend for IWMI.

As a result, the Panel and IWMI have some differing perspectives on the disciplinary mix at IWMI; the suitability of the management team to manage the organization; and the question of whether there are enough disciplinary specialists at IWMI to mentor junior scientists.

CGIAR centers also differ from top-tier universities in that they serve the interests of both the research community as well as the CGIAR members to whom the relevance of the science to development and the ultimate impact on the ground are a very high priority. The bottom line is whether IWMI's final output is only measured in terms of ISI-journal publications, or whether CGIAR centers ought to go further downstream in ensuring that the knowledge they generate can be used, and is. This debate is not new and will continue and IWMI encourages its pursuit throughout the CGIAR: IWMI intends to remain at the centre of this debate and through experience and ongoing excellence in science *and* knowledge exchange to contribute through action, not just philosophy. IWMI has developed a strategy to become a "knowledge center", to ensure that its knowledge gets used and has impact, and we welcome the Panel's advice on placing more emphasis on how we assess impact. In IWMI's view the knowledge sharing activities are not a diversion of research funds to other purposes, but are intended to change the research itself, so that it becomes a more effective process in pursuit of our mandate. The panel favors an approach where IWMI leaves knowledge sharing and associated activities, that are "post-research functions" in its view, to other specialists and stick with its core function: generating knowledge and publishing that in ISI journals.

We accept that we need to continuously assess the balance and the effectiveness of these conjoint approaches and welcome comment by applied and more academic researchers and stakeholders.

Response to Recommendations

Mission, Vision and Strategy

Recommendation 1. The Panel recommends that IWMI should enter into a research planning exercise that would carefully define its mission, vision, priorities and research themes. The exercise should provide focus for IWMI's research activities and ensure the Institute takes advantage of its established comparative strengths so that only the most highly prospective potential areas of research are explored. An objective analysis of IWMI's research specializations within the context of the CGIAR system priorities would be required to inform that exercise.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees that it is time to undertake a new strategic planning exercise and it will task the incoming DG, currently under recruitment, with the development of a new strategic plan in 2008.

Research Programs

Recommendation 2. The Panel recommends that IWMI completes and phases out the focus on urban agriculture in the current Theme 3, and simultaneously that it merges Theme 3 and 4 together to constitute a theme on Water, Health and Environment.

Response:

Noted. IWMI does not agree that the issue of re-use of wastewater in urban and peri-urban agriculture is not important enough to be a strategic priority for the institute, particular given increasing competition between agriculture and urban uses for limited water. To the contrary, IWMI feels that the very important issues of water quality and pollution will be of strategic importance for decades to come. For IWMI, the most important water quality issue we have selected to prioritize is the interface between agriculture and cities (and the large flows of nutrients and pollutants both ways), with key impacts on human health and on agriculture, and at the same time with important opportunities for wastewater re-use as well. It is around this theme that IWMI feels it can break through a key disciplinary barrier in the water sector, i.e. the complete separation between sanitation and sewerage on the one hand and irrigation and agriculture on the other hand.

At the same time, we agree that as these relatively young themes (for IWMI) evolve, the environment and health research activities are being more focused on specific priorities that fit IWMI's agriculture-food-environment agenda as well as the GCIAR system priorities. Whether the agriculture-urban interaction ought, or ought not, to be a separate theme, IWMI would like to defer to the strategic planning exercise scheduled for 2008, in order not to change the theme structure twice (now in response to the EPMR and possibly again after the strategic planning exercise).

Recommendation 3. The Panel recommends that IWMI's efforts be more directed at analytical research. Furthermore IWMI will need to develop a more tightly focused research agenda within each of its themes.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees with the Panel that IWMI's efforts should evolve in the direction of analytical, rather than descriptive research. As the Panel noted, IWMI has spent much effort in the development of (public good) water-related databases, the development of Remote Sensing and GIS methods to deal with water data-sparse environments, and the development and use of hydrologic and water resources models, exactly to enable it to conduct more analytical work, as opposed to some of the social science work conducted in the past that tends to be more descriptive. It also agrees that within the broad themes IWMI works on, the research questions need to be tightly focused. This is an ongoing process, driven by the MTP cycle and the new set of CGIAR system-wide priorities, and the development of the staffing profile and expertise that IWMI has worked hard to establish since the last review; this is poised to build on the base established and to conduct more analytical and cross-disciplinary research.

Recommendation 4. The Panel recommends that IWMI give priority to addressing critical water management issues and opportunities identified from past IWMI programs. This would include an emphasis on sustainable groundwater management. IWMI should explicitly include research into groundwater depletion as sub themes of both Themes 1 and 2.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees with the panel that IWMI's current program should be based on critical water management issues and opportunities identified from past programs. IWMI recognizes that groundwater depletion and groundwater management is indeed a key strategic priority for IWMI in both Themes 1 and 2 and IWMI agrees that it should explicitly remain so. It could also be seen as a key strategic issue for Theme 4 given recent recognition of the inter-connectedness between ground and surface water ecosystems and human livelihood.

IWMI also recognizes that it needs to respond to emerging issues and to regularly address the balance between maintaining past program streams and adapting to the new. The strategic planning process will address this.

Recommendation 5. The Panel recommends that IWMI re-establish its theme on Institutions and Policies.

Response:

Agreed in part. IWMI agrees with the Panel that Institutions and Policies is a critical priority for IWMI. IWMI proposes that the decision whether that is best served as a separate theme

or as a cross-cutting issue (as it is currently structured) should be addressed explicitly as part of the next strategic plan exercise.

Recommendation 6. The Panel recommends that IWMI develop an effective Publication Strategy to improve its performance and influence its target audiences.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI will develop and communicate a clearer Publication Strategy. IWMI's notes that its performance in terms of publications (both peer reviewed publications generally, and articles in ISI journals specifically) has improved steadily under the period under review (see Figure 1). However, IWMI agrees that its publication performance should be on par with that of other CGIAR centers, and will work hard to achieve this benchmark.

Cross-cutting Issues and Disciplines

Recommendation 7. The Panel recommends that the cross-cutting issues of poverty and gender be clearly conceptualized, meaningfully integrated and mainstreamed into research by appointing a Task Force and specifying core resources for this purpose. IWMI should articulate the expected intermediate and long term impacts of this research and the milestones for measuring progress.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees with the Panel recommendation to appoint a Task Force to conceptualize, integrate and mainstream the key cross-cutting issues of poverty and gender into IWMI's research and will allocate core resources for this purpose. It is agreed that the work of this Task Force should lead to well defined expected impacts and milestones. IWMI will appoint a second Task Force to address the same issues for "institutions and policies".

Research Management

Recommendation 8. The Panel recommends that IWMI appoint four experienced and well respected researchers to the positions of:

- Principal Physical Scientist;
- Principal Natural Scientist;
- Principal Economist; and,
- Principal Social Scientist/Policy Analyst,

who would have responsibility across the Institute for research strategy development including research staff recruitment, staff development in their discipline area including mentoring junior staff, selection of PhD candidates and Post Doctoral Fellows, ensuring rigor in the application of their discipline, 'trouble shooting' discipline-based issues, and providing advice in project development. The Panel further recommends that IWMI appoints a Deputy Director General-Research. The person filling that role should be a highly experienced researcher with an established international reputation for excellence. It is also recommended that the four 'Principal Scientists' be appointed as the Theme Leaders to further strengthen the discipline focus they will bring to IWMI.

Response:

Noted. We have indeed replaced one of the Theme Leaders with a more senior researcher (who was earlier working as a senior scientist and mentor within the theme). With that move we are of the opinion that the current group of four theme leaders has the appropriate seniority required by their position. We note that in our view, some very senior scientists are better employed in (free) senior, intellectual, mentoring roles, rather than as managers (with the associated managerial and administrative burden), although they regularly assist with developing and implementing managerial decisions. The disciplinary match of the current group of theme leaders is not divided along the lines of the four disciplines, as recommended by the Panel, since the suitability to lead the problem area of the theme was considered a more important selection criterion than the disciplinary background of the individuals involved. IWMI will indeed undertake a strategic staffing plan (recommendation 16) and will ensure that the IWMI group of scientists has an appropriate disciplinary and seniority balance. We value the mix of benefits that comes with experience and seniority alongside that of youthfulness and awareness of new technologies.

IWMI agrees with the Panel's recommendation concerning the appointment of a DDG Research.

Recommendation 9. The Panel recommends that at least five days per annum for discipline-based professional development be allocated in the time-tracker system.

Response:

Agreed. Currently each researcher has 20 days of "un-allocated" time for various purposes, including professional development, IWMI agrees with the recommendation of the panel to allocate at least 5 of these days explicitly for professional development.

Recommendation 10. The Panel recommends that IWMI ensures the CCERs it commissions are rigorous, regular and with coverage across all Themes.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI will implement the recommendation through development of a program of CCERs, led by the Board.

Recommendation 11. The Panel recommends that IWMI appoint its own specialist professional in the field of impact analysis and undertake a systematic evaluation of its research portfolio both past and future.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees with the recommendation and will implement it.

Partnerships

Recommendation 12. The Panel recommends that IWMI prioritize its list of partners and develop a new partnership strategy that is linked to this list. IWMI must further make its decentralized research structure work in favor of improving relationships with its partners including sharing credit for outputs.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees that IWMI's strongly increased emphasis on a partnership-based approach to research has led to a very large expansion of the number of partners IWMI deals with, which may not almost lead to the most effective partnerships possible. IWMI proposes to develop a new partnership strategy, and work out the roles of each of the partners more clearly, as part of the new strategic plan. While IWMI is convinced that its decentralized, benchmark-basin focused structure has helped tremendously in forging closer links with partners and increasing IWMI's impacts, it agrees with the Panel that relationships with partners can continuously be improved and particularly the sharing of credit for outputs – as measured by publications co-authored with partners – can and should be improved considerably.

Recommendation 13. The Panel recommends IWMI make a stronger effort to link up with top-tier universities/research institutes that have a reputation in the water resources area, and develop opportunities for their staff to play an active role in IWMI, including supervising PhD students, mentoring junior staff and assisting in the development of a strengthened research program.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees that a good relationship with top-tier universities is important; likewise IWMI plays a capacity building role with other, less strong universities, building their expertise in the water resources area. IWMI has traditionally had strong relationships with a small group of top-tier universities (Cornell and Wageningen, particularly). Under the period under review, IWMI has strongly expanded the number of universities with which it has joint PhD students; universities in Asia, Africa, Australia as well as the US and Europe. IWMI agrees that as part of a more focused partnership strategy (recommendation 12), it should also more clearly define its relationship with its partner universities.

Governance

Recommendation 14. The Panel recommends that informative Board documentation be made available to Board members at the latest two weeks prior to each meeting as per Board rules, in hard copy if members so request, and that draft minutes of the meetings adequately reflect Board decisions and that they be sent at most one month after the meeting.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees with this recommendation and will implement it.

Recommendation 15. The Panel recommends that the Board provide more strategic guidance to management on science and programs, that it keep more abreast of the programs' major strengths and weaknesses without getting involved in routine operational matters, and that it use the budget approval process as one tool to influence focus and priorities. The Center should also consider the creation of a Center Science Council or Advisory Board along the model used by other CGIAR centers.

Response:

Agreed in part. IWMI generally agrees with this recommendation. The Board did consider appointing a Center Science Council, but has decided that rather than creating a new and external group, it has reformed the Program Committee from a committee-of-the-whole to a smaller, more focused and probably more effective Board Committee that is intended to meet the recommendation of the Panel.

We also agree that there should be more consistent Board involvement in the approval of program strategic directions and more regular strategic guidance to management on programs.

Management and Administration

Recommendation 16. The Panel recommends that the Center prepare a long term staffing strategy immediately after the completion of its next strategic plan.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees with this recommendation and will implement it.

Recommendation 17. The Panel recommends that the policy limiting employment at IWMI to ten years be replaced with a policy stating that contracts beyond ten years of employment be subject to an in-depth review by management which would take into account IWMI's long term staffing profile needs and the staff's performance.

Response:

Agreed. IWMI agrees with this recommendation and will implement it.