

iSC Commentary on the Fifth External Programme and Management Review of IPGRI

The Report of the Fifth External Programme and Management Review (EPMR) of IPGRI was discussed at iSC/TAC 84 at FAO, Rome, Italy in the presence of the Panel Chair, Dr Mike Gale, the Chair of IPGRI's Board of Trustees, Dr Benchaphun Shinawatra Ekasingh, IPGRI DG, Dr Geoffrey Hawtin, IPGRI DG designate, Dr Emile Frison, and other members of IPGRI senior management. The interim Science Council (iSC) expresses its appreciation to Dr Mike Gale and his Panel for an extremely thorough, analytical and very readable report which offers validation of IPGRI's many areas of excellence, and numerous recommendations for further progress.

The iSC is pleased to note the very positive response from the IPGRI Board and management and it appreciates the commitment shown by the Centre in pursuing to implement the recommendations of the Panel. The Panel has carefully assessed IPGRI's work in the light of the recommendations of the Fourth EPMR. In general IPGRI has diligently implemented the recommendations, a few of which have been outdated and a few deserving continued attention.

The Report of the 5th EPMR contains twelve key recommendations. It is rich in useful suggestions in the various chapters and gives due recognition to the many achievements of the Centre. The iSC broadly endorses the Panel's recommendations and provides the following commentary, which was prepared with inputs from the CGIAR Secretariat to complement the Report.

Introduction

IPGRI grew significantly during the period under review. In terms of funding it increased its annual budget from US\$ 19.6 million in 1997 to an estimated US\$ 28.9 million in 2003. In terms of staffing there was a 73 % increase from the beginning of 1997. IPGRI has also spread its activities, and recently moved from limited quarters in Rome centre to new offices in Maccarese. The Centre is foreseeing continued growth based on demand for services and funding opportunities.

Emphasis has moved towards use of germplasm, as reflected in growing attention to in situ germplasm conservation and management and genetic resources policy work. International negotiations and agreements have required input in policy. Developments in bioinformatics and modern biology have offered a niche for IPGRI to excel in database development with multiple applications.

IPGRI programme organisation has several dimensions: it consists of three major programmes, 20 multidisciplinary projects, including regional ones, and eight strategic areas cutting across the projects. The Panel evaluated IPGRI's activities by looking at genetic resources research, policy research, regional programmes and support activities separately. The iSC finds this approach suitable. Addressing the genetic resources research activities as they correspond with the activity areas of the Global Plan of Action is helpful for illustrating how IPGRI's work links with the internationally agreed goals. Research on forest genetic resources, an activity area that falls outside the GPA, has received due attention from the Panel.

This IPGRI EPMPR provides a very useful example of self-assessment feeding into an external review. IPGRI has used the CCER mechanism systematically across its entire project portfolio, including reviewing two activity areas twice between the 4th and the 5th EPMPR. The Panel made use of 13 CCER reports and an audit on human resource management practices. The iSC believes that the positive observations of the CCERs and suggestions for improving them by revising their Terms of Reference are beneficial for IPGRI and other CGIAR Centres in further developing their self-assessment mechanisms.

Mission, Strategy and Priorities

The iSC agrees with the Panel's observation that IPGRI's original mandate to advance the conservation and use of genetic diversity is still valid. In fact this mandate allows expansion of the activities to exploit opportunities posed by demand and scientific advancement. In its current situation of continuing growth, IPGRI's challenge is to keep itself focussed on areas where it is likely to excel and achieve impact.

IPGRI's institutional strategy was last revised in 1999 and since then the Centre has engaged in and completed strategic planning for many activity areas and regions. IPGRI will begin a new institutional strategic planning exercise as the first activity to be led by the Centre's incoming DG. The timing for the 5th EPMPR was optimal to support the change in leadership, and the iSC is pleased to note that IPGRI will make full use of the report's wealth of analysis and suggestions in this exercise.

As a highly decentralised institution, IPGRI has the challenge to align its regional priority setting with global priority setting and with the priorities of other plant genetic resources networks. The iSC agrees with the Panel's suggestion to bring more clarity to priority setting and to what is expected from projects and individual scientists in terms of balance among different kinds of activities and outputs. It is important to add impact factors to priority setting. The Panel's notion that project approval mechanisms ought to be very clear is also valid.

The iSC joins the Panel in urging IPGRI to make strategic choices by identifying a few research areas of high priority where the Centre has clear comparative advantage and opportunities to excel at the world level. In agreement with the Panel, the iSC encourages the Centre to set its targets for success and recognition high, striving for global leadership in one or two key areas, and vigorously pursue those targets together with its research partners. The iSC acknowledges the need for IPGRI to remain engaged and relevant in many areas that are important for genetic resources conservation and use. However, the prospects of increasing funding have and will increase the temptation to move to many different areas of activity, including regional, even national activities focused on development that could lead to undesirable dispersal of efforts.

There are many opportunities for IPGRI to expand its activities beyond its traditional mandate of plant genetic resources. IPGRI's expertise in areas such as conservation technology, database management, characterization and policy applies to all kinds of genetic resources, and the interactions between plant and other genetics resources offer interesting new dimensions to conservation. The iSC agrees with the Panel's assessment that IPGRI should be open to collaboration with leading institutions other than plant genetic resources.

The Centre should, however, not shift its focus from plant genetic resources where it has a clear comparative advantage.

The iSC greatly values the Panel's conclusion that IPGRI has an image of an honest broker among its stakeholders. IPGRI is not considered as a competitor to research and development institutions working with similar mandates, but rather as an institute catalysing, assisting and complementing them in their work. This image of honest broker is strengthened by the quite unique mode of operation IPGRI has adopted. It has no laboratories of its own and works on a partnership mode through collaborative research projects and networks. Much of the Centre's output comes from catalysing research and initiating and supporting networks. The iSC considers IPGRI's network model optimal, particularly for the commodities like Musa, coconut, cacao and date palm. IPGRI needs to be cautious for not accumulating responsibility for these kinds of operations beyond what is optimal for its mission. This operational model could, however, be considered more widely in the CGIAR as a template for work with commodities and themes which do not warrant a full-fledged breeding or research programme within the CGIAR itself.

Research Achievements and Impact

The iSC commends IPGRI for its good performance of which the Panel found ample evidence. The Panel relied much on the CCERs assessments of specific project activities and achievements. It also conducted a stakeholder review to collect impressions on IPGRI's performance and relevance. In general the Panel in its own assessment verified the positive conclusions of the CCERs about IPGRI's productivity and the high quality of its work.

IPGRI is commended for its publishing record in ex situ genetic conservation research, for advancing well in the area of complementary conservation and use, for initiating innovative work on in situ conservation and research on crop wild relatives and in forest genetic resources. The iSC notes with satisfaction that IPGRI has produced valuable work, substantive and methodological, for integrating socio-cultural variables, and identifying indigenous farmers' knowledge in its research and recommendations on plant genetic resources; leafy vegetables in Africa being one example. IPGRI has also had significant input and been highly visible in the international policy fora, including the negotiations preceding the International Treaty for on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

IPGRI's commodity focus has grown beyond the INIBAP Musa projects to include coconut, cacao, date palm, tropical fruits and a number of neglected and underutilised crop species. One of IPGRI's major achievements includes facilitation of many effective networks for these commodities.

IPGRI's support to the Systemwide Genetic Resources Programme receives very high marks. Efforts for upgrading CGIAR genebanks, formulating common policies and developing the "gold standard" for germplasm and information management are highly appreciated across the System. The iSC agrees with the Panel that the SGRP provides a useful forum that should be open to genetic resources professionals outside the CGIAR. IPGRI's achievements in developing the SINGER database for serving the entire genetic resources community of practise and its instrumental role in initiating the Global Conservation Trust have been laudable and brought the Centre global visibility in partnership with the FAO.

In information and capacity strengthening, the evidence provided by two CCERs, the stakeholder survey and studies done by IPGRI itself indicate good productivity and impact. The iSC would have liked to see a more detailed assessment of IPGRI's performance in these very important areas of activity that cut across all other Centre projects.

IPGRI has adopted some innovative mechanisms that may impact positively in quality assurance. It employs Honorary Fellows who have had considerable impact on IPGRI's record of scientific publications and it provides small pilot grants for encouraging innovative ideas, which is unique in the System.

The iSC considers the "measures of esteem" used by the Panel as indicators of professional staff quality suitable for this kind of an institute. In addition to publications, indicators such as students supervised and lectureships give an indication of contacts with academic institutions and recognition of staff by peers outside. The iSC encourages IPGRI to seek ways of encouraging scientific opportunity and contacts for staff that are heavily involved in administration so that they may remain current in their fields. Management also needs to clearly communicate to staff what kinds of outputs are expected from them.

Governance and Management

The iSC agrees with the Panel's general conclusion about IPGRI governance and management reflected in the Recommendations 10 and 11, that the continuing growth requires that the Board and Centre management adopt more formal mechanisms for their operations and interaction, including exchange of information, lines of accountability and division of duties between different management levels and governing bodies.

Institutional Issues

The Main Phase of the IPGRI EPMR occurred at the same time as the work of the ISNAR restructuring team. Although not part of their Terms of Reference, the EPMR Panel gave some thought to an alternative proposing a merger between these two institutes. Certain areas of potential synergy between IPGRI and ISNAR were identified in the Report. The iSC is, however, strongly of the opinion that in terms of most programmatic elements, these two Centres are far apart, and therefore an institutional merger between ISNAR and IPGRI should not be an option. IPGRI has a clear mission and mandate within which it needs to prioritise and focus its actions to the most relevant areas of research. The Centre is facing enormous challenges with the changing science and global environment for germplasm conservation and use. Broadening its mandate to include very different areas of activity would not be desirable.

In a follow-up to a recommendation by the 4th EPMR, the Panel makes a strong recommendation to complete the integration of INIBAP to IPGRI. The iSC agrees with this recommendation, believing that there are synergies to be achieved in the regions and through institutional arrangements that should not be missed. At the same time it is important to capitalize on the positive image of IPGRI's Musa programme and secure the visibility of the work on bananas and plantains. Regarding genetic modification of banana and other crops, the iSC agrees with the Panel that IPGRI should articulate and obtain Board approval of a clear strategy for obtaining public support for any introduction and field testing of GM crops in the environment. The iSC joins the Panel in strongly encouraging IPGRI and IITA to pursue common interests and synergies in collaborative Musa research and commends the Centres for the steps they have been taking toward this goal.

Conclusion

The iSC congratulates IPGRI for the excellent assessment it has received from the EPMR Panel. IPGRI has maintained positive development of its resource base during difficult times which is a reflection of donor trust in IPGRI's continued relevance, fulfilling an important mission. The iSC believes that this Report provides strong assurance to the donors and stakeholders that their continuing support to IPGRI in the future is well placed.