

SC Commentary on the 4th IFPRI EPMR Report

The Report of the Fourth External Programme and Management Review (EPMR) of IFPRI was discussed at SC 3 following a presentation of the main findings and recommendations of the Report by the Panel Chair, Bruce Gardner, and after brief responses from the Centre Board of Trustees member Roberto Vazquez Platero and Director General Joachim von Braun. The SC wishes to express its appreciation to the Panel for conducting a comprehensive assessment of the Centre's past performance and presenting a sound strategic analysis and forward-looking perspective on the Centre. The SC also appreciates the facilitating role played by the Centre in the review process.

Introduction

SC is pleased to note the overall positive performance of the Centre during the period under review. This is all the more impressive given the rapid increase in budget (from \$20 million in 1998 to \$34 million in 2004), with an increasing share of restricted project funding, an expansion in the research and outreach portfolio with the incorporation of the ISNAR programme and initiation of the co-led Challenge Programme on Biofortification, and the major changes in the programmatic structure, including development of a new IFPRI Division covering development strategy and governance (DSGD). The Report provides a convincing case that IFPRI has indeed "moved with impressive agility" in aligning its organization with the many changes in the external and internal environments over the last seven years.

Based on a very comprehensive assessment of the Centre's management and programme activities over the last seven years, the Panel concludes that IFPRI has a number of notable accomplishments, among them:

- generating outputs and services of high relevance to developing countries;
- substantially increasing its publications in refereed journals;
- successfully integrating its research, capacity strengthening and outreach;
- showing exemplary leadership in the Biofortification CP and CAPRi SWP and other work with Centres;
- providing global leadership in impact assessment methodology for policy research;
- maintaining a high reputation among peers and partners; and,
- smoothly managing the absorption of ISNAR.

The SC endorses this assessment. It congratulates the Centre on its stellar performance and believes IFPRI is well positioned to meet the challenges ahead. It is particularly pleased to note from the Panel Chair's interviews with IFPRI peers that the Centre is considered by many to be the premier institute on food and agricultural policy research.

The Panel made 10 recommendations and a number of suggestions throughout the Report. These are meant primarily for improvement and to help further strengthen the Centre for the future. Indeed, the SC notes that much of the report's narrative is rich in discussion of highly relevant yet complex issues for which no right or wrong course is identified, e.g., whether IFPRI should maintain trade modelling capacity, whether IFPRI should broaden the mission to areas outside of agriculture and food security narrowly defined, and various

options for attracting and maintaining outstanding individuals in food policy or agricultural development research. The SC 3 noted that while the Panel did not address these issues in a formal sense of a recommendation, they are issues for future discussion and decision for the System as a whole and for IFPRI. The SC accepts that it probably is premature, given the information available and discussion to-date, to offer any firm conclusions or recommendations. The Centre highlighted the important value of these discussion pieces within the report in terms of provoking debate within the Centre. The SC looks forward to following the progress of that debate.

The SC endorses all of the 10 specific recommendations made by the Panel. The Centre endorsed all but one (four-part) recommendation related to IFPRI governance.

Vision, Mission and Strategy

IFPRI's mission continues to fit centrally into the CGIAR goal of achieving sustainable food security and reducing poverty in developing countries, as confirmed in the report. The current IFPRI Strategy, adopted in 2003, identifies a broad strategy under 14 research themes. The Panel noted some potential ambiguity or lack of clarity in the mission statement, specifically with respect to a broad versus a narrow definition of 'food security'. Broadly defined, this can mean undertaking work in almost any area that raises the income of the poor. The SC agrees with the Panel that IFPRI should go beyond agriculture and food security narrowly defined but cautions the Centre about moving too far a field.

How the Centre defines its agenda is critically important. The SC agrees with the Panel that IFPRI must pay greater attention to matters of prioritization and of operational tactics for carrying out its ambitious agenda for maximum effectiveness. The SC, therefore, agrees with the recommendation for enhancing the transparency of the priority setting process. Given the heavy demand for IFPRI services, it is essential that the Centre identifies a clearer mechanism for prioritising its projects.

Research, Capacity Strengthening, Communications and Director General Office

The Panel made few specific programmatic-related recommendations for each of the research divisions themselves, although the discussion within each of the Divisional sections is replete with penetrating analyses and suggestions. The absence of firm conclusions and/or recommendations appears, to some extent, to be due to the lack of sufficiently in-depth centre commissioned external reviews (CCERs) on which the Panel could draw for its own assessment. This point—the need for having detailed reviews of each of IFPRI's research divisions for the Panel to draw on—is mentioned by the Panel Chair in his cover letter and was highlighted in discussions at SC 3. It is not surprising, therefore, that four of the ten Panel recommendations relate to the need for conducting external evaluations of the Centre's research programmes. In particular, the Panel believes that the newest programmes of IFPRI, DSG and ISNAR Divisions, should have CCERs conducted within the next two years. The Centre agrees.

The SC strongly endorses recommendation 9 that the Centre institute rolling CCERs with the objective of each Division undergoing a review once every 5 years. The Centre has agreed to

this recommendation though it indicated that joint (Divisional) CCERs may be more appropriate since much of IFPRI's research is integrated across Divisions. This is a debatable point. Experience has shown that single programme or division CCERs tend to have greater depth and the SC notes the sole CCER conducted by IFPRI which covered all five Divisions had insufficient depth and coverage within Divisions, although the Panel noted it was useful nevertheless. Whatever the case, the SC firmly believes that a complete set of in-depth CCERs are needed for the EPMP teams so that precious time is not spent by the panels having to absorb and comprehend huge quantities of research and research related activities by the Centre.

The SC is pleased to note that the IFPRI's Programme Advisory Committee of ISNAR has provided adequate oversight of the emerging programme and that staff recruitment is proceeding apace. The SC is concerned, however, about the Panel's conclusion that a wide ranging, ambitious and speculative programme was being launched and was moving into areas for which it did not appear to have a comparative advantage. This warning must be taken seriously. Although the Centre has agreed to conduct a CCER within the next two years, the SC advises IFPRI to closely monitor key activities prior to that review, including the finalization of the strategy development plan and external ex-ante assessments of new project proposals.

The Panel noted on-going concerns (expressed by stakeholders both outside and within the CGIAR) about the System's comparative advantage in setting up the Global Open Agricultural and Food University. More specifically, it questioned IFPRI's comparative advantage in managing this initiative. The Panel argued that others were able to provide such services and the involvement of the Centres runs the risk of crowding them out. The SC concurs with the Panel's assessment and, like the Panel, urges IFPRI to carefully consider its role and specific contributions to this initiative.

The SC agrees with the view expressed by the Panel, largely endorsed by the Centre, that IFPRI staff should strive to increase the number of publications in the leading (top 100) journals related most closely to the Centre's business (development, nutrition, agricultural economics, policy, etc.). This is essentially the foundation for IFPRI's credibility and its influence amongst key peers, clients and other stakeholders. Publications alone, however, are not enough. IFPRI must continue to keep a focus on other major outputs, such as policy analysis and policy recommendations, capacity strengthening and generation of databases that help move it towards its goals of sustainable poverty alleviation.

Governance and Management

With respect to the four-part recommendation made about governance, the Centre agreed with the spirit of the recommendation and the good practice found therein, but did not agree with several of the Panel's assessments of the performance of IFPRI's Board. Further discussion on this topic at SC 3 revealed that at least in one instance, the Panel may not have had relevant or timely information, e.g., the annual structured evaluation process for the DG. Nevertheless, the SC is pleased to note the Centre has generally welcomed these recommendations in the spirit of constructive advice and improvement and will respond accordingly.

There is some concern about the lack of adequate financial expertise on the Board, notwithstanding the fact that most BoT members have had some experience with accounting and budgets. The SC endorses the Panel's call for greater expertise, i.e., stronger financial background, to lead to more proactive financial oversight by the Board.

Issues and Challenges for the Future

The time research staff is spending on indirect activities including search committees, task forces, publication reviews, strategic planning, fund-raising, and so forth, appears to be increasing over time. Indeed, the results of the staff survey support the Panel's view that 'time famine'—high time pressure felt by staff—appears to be the single most important constraint facing the Centre today. It seems to be a recurring problem of this centre, as it was a problem that surfaced during the last EPMR too. The SC is pleased to note that the Centre concurs with the recommendation to look carefully at this problem in a variety of ways and that it intends to test a parallel time recording system in one of its Divisions to determine just how much time is spent on indirect activities. Furthermore, it plans to explicitly recognize the time researchers spend on non-research institute type business by allocating unrestricted funds for these Institute Public Goods.

With respect to decentralization, the SC notes the recent trend towards a more decentralized staff placement. However, as pointed out by the Panel, this relates only to the two newer Divisions of IFPRI, DSGD and ISNAR, while the traditional Divisions -- MTID, FCND, and EPTD -- have hardly any field presence now at all. The SC recognizes the inherent positive and negative tradeoffs when posting staff outside of HQ. While the Panel made no recommendations or even suggestions regarding this interesting trend, the SC believes this is an important strategic aspect of how the Centre does its work, one that was correctly highlighted in the Centre's Strategy document. In due course, the SC would hope to see a carefully considered plan of regional decentralization taking into account the relative merits of a strong set of research teams at HQ versus greater distribution of staff in the different regions. The Centre agreed that this issue needs careful consideration in the future.

The report identifies an important need for the Centre: to examine what its optimal disciplinary mix and make-up should be in relation to the optimal operation of its agreed themes. The SC concurs with the view that a more explicit treatment of the disciplinary sources of scientific expertise required by IFPRI for fulfilling its mission is required. For example, greater clarity in defining the role of political scientists, the use of various specialties within economics, and the approach to research within each specialty (e.g., the development of methods vs. applications of existing methods), reflect long-term strategic decisions about what research gets top priority. While the Centre has endorsed the recommendation on the need for a strategy for optimizing the mix of disciplinary competencies and research approaches, it believes the mix should be determined by the ongoing programmatic needs and not at a broader, strategic level. There is a risk, however, that such a bottom-up approach will fail to achieve this objective, i.e., that project leaders would define priorities and develop programmes that draw only on the more traditional (applied economics) disciplinary skills.

CGIAR Secretariat's Comments on the Governance and Management Aspects of the IFPRI EPMR Report

The CGIAR Secretariat supports the governance and management related recommendations of the EPMR Panel and is pleased to note the positive response from IFPRI to these recommendations. We share the Science Council's observations on the governance and management of IFPRI. We recommend that ExCo and the CGIAR endorse the Panel's recommendations on governance and management of IFPRI.