

## **iSC Commentary on the 4<sup>th</sup> ISNAR EPMP Report**

The Report of the Fourth External Programme and Management Review (EPMP) of ISNAR was discussed at TAC/iSC 83 in the presence of the Panel Chair, Dunstan Spencer, the Chair of the ISNAR Board of Trustees, Moise Mensah, and the ISNAR Director General, Stein Bie following presentations by each. The discussion was open and frank. The iSC wishes to express its appreciation to the Panel for conducting a thorough and forward-looking review of the Centre's performance over the past five years. The iSC also appreciates the facilitating role the Centre played in this review process.

ISNAR was established within the CGIAR System with a mandate to help strengthen national agricultural research capabilities in developing countries. Over time, ISNAR's mission and mandate have evolved in response to changes in the internal and external environments in which ISNAR operates. ISNAR's new mission "to help bring about innovation in agricultural research institutions to increase the contribution of research to agricultural development for the poor", is as relevant today as it was when the institute was founded, and the challenges certainly as great, if not greater. This is confirmed in the Panel's report, which revealed a continuing and even expanding demand for ISNAR-type research products and services. Indeed, while some developing countries have been successful in building up strong and highly productive national agricultural research systems (NARS), many others—particularly in Africa (but not only there)—are actually experiencing tremendous difficulties in the face of declining financial and human resources. The iSC feels that it is precisely in these countries, where agriculture is the primary means of income and livelihood for the poor, that institutional innovations are essential for making agricultural research systems more effective. The iSC strongly believes that the CGIAR must continue to remain actively engaged in the provision of international public goods (IPG) and services that contribute to more effective agricultural research institution development.

The Panel took as its departure point, the main recommendations of the previous EPMP (Report of the 3<sup>d</sup> EPMP of ISNAR, 1997). These are related to the need for the Centre to: (a) clearly define its niche; (b) reformulate its strategy; (c) move more towards the research-based end of the research-service spectrum; and, (d) move up in the capacity building ladder. These issues were clearly dominant on the agenda of this Panel as well. The Panel's report provides a critical analysis of the Centre's performance. The iSC commends the Panel for its frank and transparent assessment and notes the Centre's generally positive and constructive responses to the nine recommendations of the Panel. Nevertheless, important points of disagreement remain between the Panel and the Centre, which were the subject of very useful discussion during the iSC meeting.

### **ISNAR's Strategy and Priorities**

A major recommendation from the last EPMP review related to the Centre's need to define its niche and re-formulate its strategy. Accordingly, the Centre developed a new strategic plan in 1998 that envisaged a more pro-active research and service institution. ISNAR revisited its strategy in 2001, adopting a new strategic plan (The Road Map) in early 2002. This new strategy broadens the scope and client base to embrace a range of agricultural research stakeholders in developing countries. ISNAR's programmes now focus on "innovation systems", seeking to identify new institutional arrangements that promote more effective generation of new knowledge. The iSC joins the Panel in commending the Centre for

adopting the new plan, which clearly recognizes the multiple sources of innovation, both public and private, in the new stakeholder/client landscape.

The iSC believes the new plan has considerable merit. More work, however, remains to be done before the plan can be effectively implemented. The Panel's analysis identified four critical areas that were not adequately defined: ISNAR's comparative advantage, and basis for it; its priority clients—a crucial aspect given the increasing number of stakeholders/clients, both public and private, in the landscape; the types of products it will produce to maximize the IPG nature of its research and services; and, a strategy for developing key alliances. In the Panel's view, the difficulties ISNAR encountered in implementing its earlier 1998 plan were, in part, due to a failure to define these key areas, resulting in a diffused research focus with many MTP projects.

Although the Centre consulted with a range of stakeholders in developing its two strategic plans, the plans did not go far enough in spelling out the rationale for the specific choices made. This highlights the importance of using systematic approaches to priority setting, and clearly articulating the links to resource allocation, as emphasized earlier by TAC in its commentaries on ISNAR's MTPs. The iSC agrees with the Panel that the Centre must move quickly now to define its major IPG product types as a basis for selecting more sharply defined priorities consistent with its resource base. This implies achieving a better understanding of the evolving demand for its own range of products and services from its priority clients and, equally important, its own competitiveness vis-à-vis alternative suppliers. At the same time, forging strategic alliances with advanced universities and other partners remains critical to ensuring its success in implementing the new Road Map.

The iSC concurs with the Panel's recommendation that the Centre must explicitly address its skill mix. The previous EPMR panel had recommended that the Centre adjust its structure and staff composition to meet the challenges ahead, particularly as it moved up the research end of the spectrum. The Panel saw little evidence that the Centre had moved ahead in strengthening professional expertise, either in-house, or through strategic partnerships. Under the new plan focusing on innovation systems, this need is even greater. The Panel notes the lack of relevant skill mix and expertise currently in ISNAR for successfully implementing the Road Map. The Panel felt that this is particularly so in fields such as organizational theory and behaviour, institutional development, innovation theory, institutional economics and public policy, among others.

The iSC is pleased to note the Centre agrees with the Panel's recommendation to implement its new strategy emphasizing selection of a few sharply focused priorities consistent with its resource base and to significantly adjust its staff breadth and depth accordingly.

### **Quality and Relevance of Research and Services**

There are a number of areas where ISNAR work is deemed of good quality and relevance to its clients. This is particularly the case with the work in ISNAR's biotechnology service (IBS) and some of the tools, frameworks and services provided for improving institutional performance. Also, the CGIAR Central Advisory Service on intellectual property (CAS) hosted by ISNAR received high marks. ISNAR's training activities are widely appreciated and considered of good quality, and are in continuous demand.

Notwithstanding these examples, there is little evidence from the report that ISNAR is producing sufficient quality research and advisory services. This is particularly true with respect to knowledge generation. Throughout the report, the Panel has identified a number of ‘missed opportunities’ where ISNAR could and should have played a more prominent role, particularly in the area of agricultural research policy—which is central to ISNAR’s mandate. Other potentially fruitful areas of work highly relevant to ISNAR mandate include defining a stakeholder landscape for its priority setting, further development and updating of its products and tools, enhancing institutional performance, comprehensive analyses of NARS strengths and weaknesses, case studies of successful institution building activities and synthesis across the studies, and more actively engaging top policy makers or donors in effective dialogue.

Of particular concern to the Panel, and to the iSC, is the number and quality of publications produced by ISNAR professional staff over the past five years. An important measure of research output is the number of peer-reviewed articles in internationally refereed journals. The number of externally reviewed publications has dropped by about 50% over the previous five year period. This must be viewed in the context of the 3<sup>rd</sup> EPMP report recommendation that the Centre move upstream in the research-service spectrum, which the Centre had endorsed. ISNAR’s output over the last five years of less than 0.2 peer-reviewed journal articles per scientist per year is extremely low, and well below that of centres of excellence in the social sciences.

The iSC considers that the Panel’s criticism of ISNAR’s planning and review processes is justified. Indeed, ISNAR has not undertaken in a consistent manner the standard planning and monitoring processes so essential for establishing programme priorities and ensuring quality control. The Centre apparently relied on internal programme reviews to ensure quality and relevance of its research and services. There were no CCERs commissioned in the past five years, with the exception of the Impact Assessment Study report (see below). The iSC concurs with the Panel in its assessment that the Centre has failed to develop an impact and evaluation culture within the Institute. Such a deficiency is even more relevant for a Centre with a mandate to assist developing country institutions in enhancing the quality and effectiveness of research management. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> EPMP report commentary, TAC stated that ISNAR should subject all of its work to rigorous external review prior to the next EPMP (TAC Commentary, 3<sup>rd</sup> ISNAR EPMP Report). In the 1999-2001 MTP analysis by TAC, the Committee urged ISNAR to ensure stronger coherence in its research agenda and to develop mechanisms to monitor quality in all areas of its work.

The iSC, therefore, strongly supports the Panel’s recommendation that ISNAR institutionalize comprehensive planning and priority setting as well as quality control processes to ensure the relevance and quality of its research and service activities.

The Panel made three recommendations specific to the programmatic agenda of ISNAR, relating to four of the MTP projects. The recommendations propose dropping (for MTP 5), transferring (MTP 1), or delaying implementation (MTP 3) of parts of the current programme. While the Centre endorsed the recommendation related to MTP 3, and agreed with the Panel’s suggestion to re-consider key elements of the MTP 6 project, it did not endorse the recommendation to dissolve MTP 5. The iSC notes the arguments of the Panel but is not in a position to recommend closure to this project. Instead, the iSC recommends that the Centre re-assess the rationale and comparative advantage of its involvement in MTP 5 as it proceeds to operationalize its new innovations systems framework.

The perception of the Centre (as stated in the Centre's Response) that the major part (two thirds) of their work received high marks in the EPMR report, was challenged by the Panel Chair during the iSC meeting. A mix of positive remarks and criticisms throughout Section 4 of the Report indicates to the iSC that the Panel's views were accurately stated in their pertinent recommendations numbers 3 to 5.

### **Achievements and Impact**

The Panel based its assessment of achievements and impacts of the programmes on the ISNAR Impact Assessment Study<sup>1</sup> completed at the start of the Main Phase of the review and on the Panel's own assessments based on the most recent internal programme review (with one external reviewer), project documents, publications, and observations and impressions from the field visits and client/stakeholder interviews.

The iSC is pleased to highlight some notable accomplishments the Centre has made over the past five years. Its biotechnology decision tools and frameworks are being applied in a number of countries and various research management tools and processes and participatory network approaches are being applied in several countries and are highly appreciated. In addition, the Centre continues to provide good quality training on a variety of themes, and has Web-based curricula and training modules that are frequently downloaded. However, the Panel noted that these materials should be updated. Finally, the Panel notes ISNAR has provided quality advisory services to over 20 countries and, in two Latin American countries these have contributed to significant institutional change.

The iSC concurs with the Panel that these and other achievements and impacts noted in the EPMR report are not sufficient for a centre of excellence in agricultural research policy, organization and management. The Panel concluded that ISNAR's contribution to new knowledge has been modest and that measurable improvements in overall institutional capacity of NARS have been very limited and are cause for concern. The iSC agrees with the Panel that greater contributions could have been made on the overarching research policy issues of the day—areas such as decentralization, competitive and contractual funding, policies to promote the private sector R&D and links to broader S&T policy.

Importantly for a CGIAR centre, ISNAR has also had difficulties in capturing the IPG dimension of its work. The exception to this is its management tools and training modules, and even these are in need of updating now. ISNAR's own Impact Assessment Study concludes that impacts have been modest and detected only minimal awareness of ISNAR's products among those NAROs who are not its immediate clients. The Panel concluded that although ISNAR can point to significant impacts at the level of individuals and on some organizations, impacts of its research, advisory services, and training have resulted in significant strengthening of national research system capacity in only a handful of countries.

### **Governance and Management**

The Panel made three recommendations covering the Board and Management functions of the Centre with several sub-recommendations within each. These relate to developing a Board of Trustee profile and associated nominating strategy for attracting highly talented individuals representing the private and philanthropic sectors, reporting more frequently by Management

<sup>1</sup> Anderson, J.R., Anandajayasekaram, P., Craswell, E., Rukuni, M. 2002. Impact Assessment of ISNAR, 1997 – 2001. Report of an ISNAR Team: June 30, 2002.

to the Board, and four specific recommendations aimed at improving financial management procedures within the Centre. While the Centre has not fully endorsed all the specific recommendations made by the Panel, it has endorsed the major elements of these. The iSC is satisfied that the Centre has responded adequately to the underlying thrust of the recommendations—the need for continual improvements in Board governance and oversight functions and the need for Management to provide strong leadership.

While the Panel is to be commended for outlining the new governance model emerging today and the range of due diligence practices and personal competencies that should characterize Boards and its members everywhere, the iSC believes ISNAR, and CGIAR centres in general, cannot be held to standards and practices not yet adopted by the CGIAR System, however meritorious. Nevertheless, the iSC is concerned that, apparently, neither the Centre Board nor Senior Management detected in advance the decline in scientific productivity that occurred in the Centre over the last five years.

Finally, the iSC recognizes the significant value of the Panel’s commentary on the changing roles that all Boards are being asked to fulfil today and believes that all Centres should be providing the attention and leadership that “best practices” demand today, irrespective of the norms and practices to which they may be held accountable by the System itself.

### **The Future**

The iSC compliments the Panel for putting forward an analysis of the challenges that ISNAR faces and specifying three options for the future. A frank discussion on those options took place during the iSC meeting as the Centre Board Chair, Director General and the Panel Chair expressed their views on the viability of each option.

The iSC concurs with the Panel and the Centre that ‘business as usual’ is not a viable option for the future. The Panel recommended that the CGIAR carefully consider Option 2 which focuses on a decentralized service-oriented ISNAR. The iSC, while recognizing the merits in some of the elements for change described by the Panel under Option 2, believes that there are other alternatives that need to be explored. In particular, with respect to Option 2, the iSC does not agree that the transfer of ISNAR’s analytical policy research to IFPRI is justified (complementarity and synergy between research and advisory services would be lost). However, this has significant implications with respect to the need for re-tooling and re-staffing to meet the analytical and action research needs of the Centre. In the context of the new innovations systems framework, it will require a major change in the disciplinary mix towards institutional economics, public administration, political science and organization theory and change.

The iSC also believes that the devolution of action research and services to ROs and SROs should be considered only after an analysis of their capacity and willingness to assume that function. Other questions pertaining to the future structure and viability of the Centre are best addressed in the context of a formal in-depth assessment of the nature of the demand for ISNAR-type products and services. The landscape of clients, stakeholders, and service providers in ISNAR’s domain has changed considerably and continues to change. ISNAR’s competitiveness, vis-à-vis alternative suppliers will also have to be assessed.

The iSC strongly believes that ISNAR needs to respond to the challenges facing it as indicated by the Panel (p. 64). A 'new ISNAR' should be designed and be characterized by the following features:

- a centre of excellence in agricultural research policy, organization and management;
- producing research and services of high quality with demonstrated impacts; this will enhance its credibility in the eyes of both donors and stakeholders;
- focusing its activities on IPGs and services thus contributing to the mandate of the CGIAR;
- aware of and responsive to key changes in its external environment
- clear understanding of its comparative advantage and appropriate niche within the research – service continuum of the agricultural research arena;
- decentralized and primarily focused in Africa where CGIAR support in institution strengthening is needed the most.

To move swiftly in the direction of designing and implementing this 'new ISNAR', the iSC recommends that a change team be appointed by the Group to design and develop an action plan for the necessary changes in structure, functions and programme of the Centre, with recommendations for process and timing of implementation. The Change Team would report to the Group with its recommendations. As a change in leadership at ISNAR is expected within the coming months, it is essential that this exercise be completed as expeditiously as possible. This will provide critical guidance to the DG search committee in helping define and identify the appropriate skills and leadership required for the 'new ISNAR'.