

**Science Council Commentary  
on the  
ASB External Review Report**

The full Report of the External Review of the Systemwide Program on Alternatives to Slash and Burn (ASB), as well as the SC Commentary, the ASB Program Response, and the Panel Report are available electronically as a supporting document to this AGM Agenda item.

SCIENCE COUNCIL SECRETARIAT

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## **SC Commentary on the ASB Review Report**

Dr. William Clark, Panel chair presented to the SC the main findings and recommendations of the external review of the ASB Program via teleconference call and PowerPoint presentation at SC 4. A brief 'preliminary response' to the report was given by Tom Tomich, the ASB Global Coordinator, on behalf of ICRAF, the convening Centre for the ASB. This was followed by discussion amongst the SC members and observers led by Hans Gregersen. Subsequent to the SC presentation and discussion, the ASB program provided a very thorough, thoughtfully written and positive response to the report and the recommendations of the Panel. The Program agreed with all the recommendations and provided some insights on how it will address most of them. Details for implementation remain to be worked out. The SC will be monitoring the implementation of the recommendations in the coming MTPs.

The SC thanks the Panel for an innovative and thorough evaluation of the ASB program. The SC also congratulates the ASB program for a positive set of review conclusions in the evaluation report.

The review report is well written and clear. With respect to the specific ToR of the review, the major conclusions of the Panel are:

- ASB has been highly relevant to the CGIAR's core mission and is pursuing work well aligned with the Science Council's recently articulated System Research Priorities for 2005-2015.
- ASB has created the world's pre-eminent system for use-driven, comparative scientific investigation of human-environment interactions at the forest margin across the pan tropic domain. Citation analysis and other objective measures show that ASB results are treated as influential global public goods by research communities specializing in the ASB domain around the world.
- ASB has developed an effective and efficient governing structure that successfully integrates capabilities and concerns across CGIAR Centers, tropical regions, scales and disciplines. Support from, and integration with, the host Center ICRAF has been exemplary.
- ASB, with help from ICRAF, has been effective in mobilizing a generally increasing level of financial resources to support its work. These resources, however, have been both inadequate in total amount and too imbalanced in allocation between global and regional tasks to enable the Program to realize its full potential. Solving this will require constructive intervention at the level of the SC and CGIAR to improve incentive structures facing Centers across the CGIAR and potential outside collaborators.

- Looking to the future, the Panel concluded that the capacity created by ASB could make a unique contribution to CGIAR and SC goals on integrated land, water and forest management at landscape level. That capacity should be sustained and strengthened.

The Panel has been, in the SC's view, highly innovative in the use of methods to document in both quantitative and qualitative terms the influence and outcomes from the ASB, particularly in the area of knowledge generation, e.g., changing perspectives on 'the problem' and developing tools for analysis ("ASB Matrix"). The claims for impact from other kinds of outputs (Action R&D and capacity building) are less well supported.

The Panel notes that the ASB has created a truly international public good of reliable knowledge regarding the functioning of human-environment systems at the tropical forest margins around the world. It has achieved this by generating comparable, co-located data across its benchmark sites and used its Global Coordinating Office to undertake across-site syntheses. SC regards this as a valuable template to help guide future system priorities and strategies.

The SC recognizes and appreciates the fact that the Panel focused on the management, governance and value added of the overall program itself, rather than on the individual component activities. At the same time, the SC would have liked to have seen more systematic and detailed discussion of information, where available, about on-the-ground impacts of specific technology and policy interventions – and the research results leading up to them. Although the ASB program claims that there has in fact been 'considerable on-the-ground impact from ASB partner interventions', the panel's report, as written, does not provide ample evidence of this. Nor does it provide a sense of what technologies are showing most promise, which do not seem to be moving, and what is in the pipeline. The SC recognizes that the Panel felt this was one of the deficiencies in the ASB in that it had no mechanism for tracking and targeting its technology and policy outputs into action and impact. Without this information the Panel obviously could not undertake systematic impact assessment in the time available.

The report gives ASB high marks on capacity building (p. 62), but also acknowledges the difficulty of measuring the effects of capacity building activities. The report does not provide much evidence for the claim that ASB has been very successful in this area. The ASB response to Recommendation C regarding the need to more explicitly prioritize capacity building for future impacts, indicated that the program has not yet been convinced of the precedence it should accord to this area, and the relative emphasis to be given to training courses *per se*, compared to learning-by-doing collaborative research. The SC appreciates the dilemma facing the ASB in this regard and is hopeful the systemwide training evaluation currently underway by an expert panel may shed some light on these issues.

The Panel raises in several places the issue of the role of the ASB program in the research to development continuum. The issue is raised particularly in the context of the Panel's major conclusion that: *The Program's greatest shortcoming is that it has been unable to*

*secure or mobilize the resources to extend its results to any but a small fraction of the 1.2 billion people across forest margins of the tropics who are still struggling to mitigate their poverty.* In addressing this shortcoming, the Panel avoids taking a stand on the role of the ASB program at the development end of the continuum, stating that this is a broader issue that the CGIAR needs to come to grips within a more general context. The Panel suggests that many of ASB's research and innovation results take a long time to yield impacts and require considerable development investments with benefits materializing in the distant future. Thus, in order to generate the development benefits, consideration needs to be given to the attributes of research results which could be politically appealing and economically attractive to governments or financial institutions, so the necessary complementary development investment takes place. This issue is not limited only to the ASB program, but is more generic. The SC considers that a thorough discussion among CGIAR stakeholders is needed regarding the appropriate location of CGIAR work in the research-development continuum.

The Panel suggests two options for the future of the ASB program. The first option is business as usual, with the ASB progressing along the same path as at present. The second path involves getting more specifically involved in the development end of the research to development continuum. The Panel suggests that the ASB program should make a choice between the two options, informed by where the CGIAR ends up after a thorough debate on the appropriate role for the CGIAR along the research-development continuum. The SC appreciates the Panel's unwillingness to recommend which of the two options the ASB program should choose without having in hand the broader conclusions from a CGIAR wide debate. The SC is planning to examine this important system issue in more depth over the coming months.

The Panel has several explicit recommendations for the CGIAR as a whole. These include:

*Recommendation F: The CGIAR system should help to assure a sustained investment in key coordinating staff that make the ASB a true SWP*

*Recommendation G: The CGIAR system should take steps to improve the incentives for collaboration among centers and programs in activities central to achieving system-wide goals, including joint funding proposals*

The SC takes note of these recommendations, recognizing that making recommendations beyond the program were not part of the TORs for the Panel and that the analysis underlying the recommendations is missing. The tensions among centres resulting from perceived or actual competition and "free-riding" are real, not only in the ASB but across the system. With the formation of the Alliance Executive there may be an opportunity for the SC to work with it and other CGIAR stakeholders to design more effective collaborative funding and incentive mechanisms in support of the new system priorities and further cross-centre collaboration.

The two recommendations relate to more fundamental problems facing the ASB program on raising sufficient funds to support an adequate size program and to the program lacking security in resource availability over time. The argument is that if there is no security of funding, then problems of governance and continuity develop and it becomes

difficult to sustain the research program focused on international public goods. Indeed it is this aspect of the program that has suffered most from funding constraints.

The SC notes that the first three Panel recommendations relate to the need for the program to increase its efforts in tracking its outputs and assessing the impacts of those outputs. Thus, the first three recommendations from the Panel have as the final sentence: “[the ASB program] should develop metrics of the outcomes and impacts actually achieved, and regularly compare these with its objectives.” The SC strongly agrees with this recommendation from the panel, which it obviously feels is very important.

The SC considers that the “results-based management” (RBM) approach used by the Panel in its assessment is appropriate to this exercise. The impact pathway is clearly spelled out and elements decomposed in the context of a succession of components internal to the program elements (input, activity, output) and external to the program elements (uptake, outcome, impact). As such, the SC will be considering seriously the Panel’s Recommendation L suggesting use of this framework in future reviews. The SC acknowledges the Panel’s innovative methods and metrics used, e.g., the “Gold Standard”, methods of tracking and quantifying and triangulation. The SC also takes note of the Panel recommendation that ... *the CGIAR develop and publicize standard comparative metrics and data for use in future RBM assessments of particular programs*, and it agrees with the ASB response that the SC should consider taking on some role in developing such metrics for use across SWPs in future assessments and performance monitoring.

The SC takes note of the fact that the ASB program has a new impact-focused priority setting system that parallels the RBM approach. This is particularly important, given that the Panel feels that:

*the informal priority setting system that served the Program well through its first five years has been increasingly unable to handle emergent tensions in three areas: i) allocation of effort to create scientific knowledge and technical innovation versus effort to move that knowledge and know-how into practice; ii) effort devoted to addressing development goals vs. conservation goals; and iii) effort devoted to providing global public goods versus regional and local ones.”*

The SC also takes note of the fact that the Panel wonders whether the management structures and resources will be in place to make the ASB’s “admirable” new priority setting plan a reality that can overcome the priority setting issues raised above.

The SC notes with interest the Panel’s conclusion that: *one of ASB’s greatest accomplishments may well be its success in functioning as a dynamic learning organization. As effectively as any organization we know, it has used systematic reflection on its own research and experience not only to learn better answers to its original questions, but also to learn better questions to ask.* The SC believes that while the learning character of the organization is highly valuable, the greatest accomplishments should be measured by outputs leading to achieving CGIAR goals.

The SC supports the Panel’s two recommendations related to governance:

*Recommendation H: that ASB should continue the effort to formalize its governance structures that has recently resulted in the publication of a formal “Governance Policy” document... and*

*Recommendation I that ASB and its host Center ICRAF should give strong consideration to creating some form of independent ASB advisory group to assist the program in its realizing its existing commitment to self-reflection and learning...*

The SC agrees that the potential for future impacts is likely to be enhanced by a more pro-active and inclusive approach to those organizations, researchers and users working in the ASB domain, but not formally members of the GSG or part of the ASB consortium. The future emphases on improved communications, dissemination, training and capacity strengthening in this context deserve explicit consideration as the ASB reviews its future priorities and strategies.

The SC also sees the logic of the Panel’s recommendation that the program find a new name that more correctly reflects the program’s evolving focus and domain.