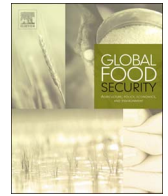




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Reforming the research policy and impact culture in the CGIAR: Integrating science and systemic capacity development

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the CGIAR -through its CGIAR Research Programmes-is struggling to fulfil its international mandate of conducting strategic research that contributes to agricultural development and global food security. Ongoing reforms have resulted in a situation where the CGIAR is assessed as if it were a development organisation. This leads the CGIAR to raise unrealistic expectations regarding the development impacts of the science conducted, resulting in ever growing distrust between the Centres and the donor community. Moreover, its short-term funding cycle and current mode of safeguarding scientific quality are not conducive to doing strategic and potentially transformative research. The paper proposes changes in the CGIAR impact culture, driven by a shift in policies that govern the everyday implementation and assessment of research. In line with this, we suggest that the best way to combine the international 'science' and 'development' mandates is through scientific capacity development of staff belonging to national research and innovation systems. This simultaneously requires major changes in the time-horizon of donor funding, and in how research programmes are selected and led.

One sentence abstract: The CGIAR should not be managed and assessed as a development organisation, and requires a longer-term horizon in its funding and governance arrangements.

1. Introduction

Over the past 50 years international donors have invested considerable resources in the CGIAR (formerly the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research) (see e.g. Herdt, 2012). Today, the CGIAR consists of 15 Centres that carry out research to support agricultural development as well as nutrition security and environmental sustainability. This research is conducted in partnership with Universities, organisations belonging to National Agricultural Research and Extension Systems (NARES), the private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including farmer organisations. While the CGIAR has been credited for its role in bringing about the Green Revolution, concerns in later periods have resulted in a continuous stream of reforms (McCalla, 2014). In recent years, major reforms were implemented from 2009 onwards, and reportedly “transformed our loose coalition of like-minded but separate research and donor organisations into a coherent, business-like whole that is greater than the sum of its parts” (CGIAR, 2016). More specifically, the CGIAR website reported important shifts that are indicative of the kinds of objectives that were pursued (see Table 1).

However, this positive image portrayed on the CGIAR website in

early 2016 was not fully congruent with the final report that the mid-term review panel of the CGIAR reform published in October 2014 (Beddington et al., 2014). Though positive outcomes such as enhanced impact orientation and collaboration, the formulation of a system-wide Strategic Results Framework (SRF), and improvements in resource mobilization and oversight were observed, reported weaknesses include inability to prioritize research in accordance with donor and end user needs, significant governance ambiguities, limitations in ensuring research quality and high transaction costs. A later synthesis report bringing together lessons from 15 CGIAR Research Programme (CRP) evaluations (Birner and Byerlee, 2016) arrives at largely similar conclusions, and further highlights ambiguities in how the CGIAR is positioned in the research-development continuum, tensions in funding arrangements and limited progress in making the CGIAR function “as a single institution” (Birner and Byerlee, 2016: 79). These reports were followed by a new round of transformations in 2015 and 2016. The positive statements on the website were removed in the course of 2016.

Based on recommendations derived from these ‘birds-eye’ perspectives on the CGIAR reform, at a macro level, we currently witness important changes in the central CGIAR governance structure and in the portfolio of CGIAR Research Programmes (CRPs). To inspire further

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Table 1
Self-reported outcomes of the reform as portrayed on the CGIAR website (CGIAR, 2016).

Where we were	Where we are now
Mission creep, trying to do everything, supply-driven research	Demand-driven research that tackles global development challenges
Duplicating each other, no common vision or strategy	Collaborating to deliver results that make a difference to poor people
Unwieldy governance, not accountable	Lean, business-like, and accountable
Fossilized partnerships hampering the spread of research findings	Strong, dynamic partnerships with national agricultural research systems, the private sector, and civil society
Fragmented funding	Funding tied to research priorities
Declining financial support	Secure and growing funding

thinking about reforms and policies needed at more operational levels, we provide a complementary micro-level perspective from scientists involved in the everyday planning and operation of research and partnership activities. Our insights derive from a 4-year intensive involvement and participant observation as full partner in one of the CRPs -Humidtropics (see Leeuwis et al., 2017a, 2017b for details)- as well as interactions with other CRPs. These centrally supported CRPs are governed in a specific way, and form only part of the full portfolio of activities undertaken by individual CGIAR Centres, and our reflections are thus based on the CRP context and not on bilateral relationships different Centres and donors may have. We first point to some core tensions experienced in this specific CRP setting, and then suggest further improvements that may be realised at the level of research governance, taking into account the broader mandate and comparative advantage of the CGIAR.

2. Tensions experienced in the implementation of CRPs

2.1. Doing science and achieving development impact: is the CGIAR a research or a development organisation?

The CGIAR is under increased pressure to demonstrate that its research contributes to ‘development impact’ (Renkow and Byerlee, 2010). Key donors ask CRPs to make quantitative promises about the ‘development outcomes’ that will be achieved (e.g. in terms of key SRF objectives like poverty reduction, improved nutrition, resource-use efficiency, see CGIAR Consortium Office, 2015:5) and show evidence of realised impact. Our observations suggest that –in order to satisfy donor demands- projected outcomes are set at levels that researchers themselves do not find credible and plausible. At the same time, incentive systems for making a career in the CGIAR still highly value the publishing of peer-reviewed articles. This tension reflects a broader discussion within the CGIAR on the extent to which Centres should take responsibility for the ‘delivery’ and ‘uptake’ of knowledge and technology in particular settings, or concentrate merely on the production of ‘international public goods’ (Spielman, 2007; Dalrymple, 2008) to be disseminated by national development partners (Kamanda, 2016). Researchers in the CGIAR thus experience a tension between working towards ‘scientific output’ and working towards ‘development output’, and raise the question whether the CGIAR should be looked at primarily as a ‘research organisation’ or a ‘development organisation’ (see also Birner and Byerlee, 2016). While the CGIAR reform clearly asks the CGIAR to be both, it is not self-evident how the two can or should be combined in practice. It creates a situation in which projects and programmes do ‘a little bit of both’, run the risk of missing out on both the science and the development objectives, and suffer from confusion on who sets the research for development agenda (see Schut et al., 2016). In relation to the latter, we have pointed to the existence of fundamentally different views on whether and how research should be embedded in place-based contexts and be driven by the needs of national

partners and stakeholders (Leeuwis et al., 2017a, 2017b). While some argue that –in order to have impact- research must be responsive to specific contextual stakeholder demands, others are of the opinion that such research distracts from the CGIAR’s mandate to produce international public goods based on strategic research. Thus, the strong pressure to demonstrate societal impact has arguably resulted in less clarity about the identity and preferred *modus operandi* of the CGIAR.

2.2. Short-term versus long-term horizons: ‘low-hanging fruits’ or system transformation

The above tension is aggravated in practice by strong emphasis on short term concerns. Officially CRPs have a long-term horizon which is congruent with the transformative ambition implied by the mission of the CGIAR. In practice, however, the CRPs work with a yearly budget cycle, with programmes having an indicative budget at the start of the year that may well be adjusted as the year proceeds, giving rise to emergency budget changes (in recent years usually cuts) towards the end of the year. Moreover, the CRPs make a new Plan Of Work and Budget (POWB) every year, leading a to a continuous re-writing and re-negotiation of the programme activities and corresponding transaction costs, and distraction from the actual work that needs to be done. Moreover, while it is known that the path from technical research to the kinds of societal impacts aspired by the SRF can easily take decades rather than years (Almekinders et al., 2014), and that the ‘failures’ of today may shape or be the ‘successes’ of tomorrow (Elzen et al., 2012), CGIAR researchers feel a strong urgency to demonstrate how today’s research activities contribute to tomorrow’s development. This impact culture is reinforced by independent evaluations commissioned by the CGIAR, which tend to take the current activities and programme components (and not those of say 10 years ago) as the starting point for discussing evidence for impact with the programme participants (see CGIAR-IEA, 2015a, 2015b). The risk here is that CGIAR activities become directed at generating ‘quick wins’ rather than working towards the kinds of long-term transformations that are needed to combat poverty and enhance global food security.

2.3. Making scientific rationale and quality largely invisible

The CGIAR has an Independent Science and Partnership Council (ISPC) consisting of 7 members that advises on the scientific quality of the CRP proposals. Another body that plays an important role in safeguarding scientific quality is the System Management Office (SMO), that oversees the yearly POWB proposals and reports. Typically, proposals and reports are subdivided in ‘flagships’ and lower level ‘clusters of activities’. These ‘clusters of activities’ can still be quite substantial in terms of yearly budget; they often involve researchers from several CGIAR Centres and partners, and are composed of multiple lines of action and inquiry proposed by these. Yet, in CRP proposals the scientific rationale of such clusters needs to be described in about 200 words. In the yearly POWB proposals and reports, the word limits are even more stringent as text needs to fit typically into a spreadsheet or table. As a consequence, such clusters tend to be described in terms of an overall question and ambition, with minimal references to the state-of-the-art and/or theories and methodologies used. Not surprisingly, evaluators and donors are left with many questions, and researchers are left frustrated by the inability to properly motivate and position their activities in a scientifically sound way. At the same time, comments received from the ISPC on components of proposals tend to be equally cursory. In short, we see that current programming practices do not include and stimulate an in-depth and specialised scientific dialogue and peer review of separate programme components.

3. How to change the *modus operandi* of CGIAR research?

The tensions experienced are not unique (see e.g. Roux et al., 2010)

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