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ISPC Note on the CGIAR Strategic Results Framework

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The ISPC has noted previously the importance of the Strategic Results Framework to the effective implementation of the goals for the new CGIAR.

The CGIAR's Strategy and Results Framework (SRF), which is a step further than simply an institutional strategy, is intended to "...guide the development of a results-oriented research agenda in line with the CGIAR's new vision and strategic objectives." The SRF is viewed as being central to meeting the four principles of the new CGIAR (Box 1).

Box 1.

A New Joint Declaration

At the CGIAR Business Meeting on 7-8 December 2009, in Washington DC, CGIAR Members unanimously endorsed a Joint Declaration setting out key principles of the new CGIAR:

- A **harmonized approach** for supporting and conducting research through a dual structure, which consists of a Consortium of CGIAR Centers and a new CGIAR Fund
- **Management for results** in accordance with the Strategy and Results Framework (SRF) and portfolio of Mega Programs that derive from the SRF
- **Effective governance** and **efficient operations** for better provision and use of resources
- **Strong collaboration and partnerships** with and among funders, implementers, and users of SRF research as well as other external partners supporting the SRF

The SRF is intended to set "common goals (in terms of development impacts), strategic objectives, and results (in terms of outputs and outcomes) [that are] to be jointly achieved by the Fund, the Consortium, and the bilateral funders to the Centers within a certain time frame."

Elsewhere, the SRF is described as one of the *bridging mechanisms* joining the Consortium and Fund pillars of the new CGIAR. The other bridges are Performance Agreements for Mega-Programs, a Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Framework and the Independent Science and Partnership Council. As such, the ISPC considers that the SRF should play a vital role in the cohesion of the CGIAR, essential to the implementation of the new Constitution and within which all the required components of the CGIAR should find their place and contribution.

A critique of an earlier version (October 2009) of the SRF had been offered by the Science Council[1]. The original draft SRF established useful data and modelling procedures assessing production potential, the geographical distribution of poverty etc. Since November 2009 the SRF has undergone revision and reconsideration, resulting in two major developments, namely, (i) enlarging the number of MPs and/ or their components; and, more recently,
(ii) redefining development themes under which MegaPrograms become the "manageable units" of a portfolio.

The ISPC has recently considered the document *A Strategy and Results framework for the CGIAR*, dated 7 June 2010 which was prepared for consideration of the CGIAR Funders' Forum.

The ISPC is disappointed to find that the revised SRF is inadequate as a document purporting to describe the heart of the CGIAR transition process. These changes and new text do not allay the original concerns of the SC that the linkage between background and MP (or thematic) choices have not been established. The SRF still lacks a clear analysis from which the highest priority research areas for the CGIAR can be derived or an articulation of the feasible results to be derived from MegaPrograms. The ISPC is concerned further that the process of MP formulation is proceeding prior to developing the SRF as a coherent concept, irrespective of the need to add more detail on goals, pathways and deliverables. The use of several author teams involved in the genesis of the document over time, including the probable proponents of the work, has resulted in a lack of clarity over future intentions. The current text provides a series of assertions about research areas and processes without providing convincing evidence, or the basis upon which MegaPrograms may be judged in the future.

The most serious concerns are:

- The final document makes inadequate reference to the major recent sources of thinking about agriculture or points out where and how the CGIAR maintains or creates its niche to tackle aspects of these problems.

- Similarly, it does not discuss the paths to delivery of outputs, outcomes and impacts designed to meet the concrete issues raised (for instance in the WDR 2008 or the IAASTD report) nor discuss the strategy for making trade-offs between production and sustainability goals, or the alternative or parallel research paths that might have to be considered. Each MP is justified in its own right - with unsubstantiated claims for reaching beneficiaries or understanding where the CGIAR is looking for synergies from a new portfolio.

- The lack of objective priority setting: no convincing rationale is advanced for the choices of Themes and MegaPrograms and no boundaries to and between the choices are evident. The choices for NRM research do not convincingly arise from use of the models quoted.

- The level of specific detail for many Themes or MPs is variable, often vague, and the SRF still has many of the deficiencies of earlier drafts especially in terms of linking

[1] See
http://www.sciencecouncil.cgiar.org/fileadmin/user_upload/sciencecouncil/SC_contributions_to_the_Change_Process/SC_response_to_the_SRF_21_Oct_version_021109.pdf

MPs to the results framework. [Parallel progress with MP development has also been slower than anticipated and so, currently, much of the substance for decision-making is missing.]

- Some MPs (water) provide specific results, while others where it might be possible to do so, such as MP3 on crop productivity, provide no results.
- Some MPs provide modest or few details on activities. Some, such as MP2 on policies and institutions, are so broad that it would cover any type of social science research related to development.
- There has been no effort to reduce the potential for major boundary issues between MPs. Over time each MP or thematic area tends to expand its scope encroaching on other MPs, resulting in a likely major problem of credibility for the overall results framework. For example, adding the number of poor people relevant to each MP over MPs, results in a total far higher than the number of poor people in the world.
- The rationale for individual MPs in MP3 is often not clear. For example, does a MP on dryland cereals make sense—this presumably lumping barley with sorghum and millet? But a case could be made to put barley with wheat since they are grown in the same areas. Similar questions can be asked for the arrangement for pulses, or for bringing together livestock and fish from aquaculture. There has to be some rationale for lumping systems or commodities together in terms of research synergies and efficiencies.
- MP1 is particularly disappointing on specifics and excitement given that this was supposed to be a flagship of the new CGIAR. The choice of systems is not rationalized. The data on poverty in dryland systems is not consistent with the data in table 3.2. According to that table, the CGIAR should be investing in medium and high potential rainfed areas and some irrigated areas. In any event, "dryland systems" or "humid tropics" are far too broad to meaningfully organize research. MP1 needs to be much more specific starting from where poor people are and where there is potential for international research to make a difference.
- There is the possibility of substantial overlap between MP1 and MP3, especially since MP3 has been defined in terms of rice-based systems etc. This speaks of a document that has yielded to the need to be inclusive of all Centers rather than being strategic. For example, if there is a dryland systems program in MP1, why is there dryland cereals program in MP3 too, etc.
- The content of some thematic areas is still clearly undecided (MP4), so that many possible areas for research and associated activities are listed leading to a lack of the expected focus in nearly all areas described.
- From the above it is clear that many of the claims advanced in the text - that MPs have been selected for maximum synergies, impact pathways etc - are unjustified.
- It does not address (other than by general statements) the strategic intent for the CGIAR in terms of (i) the appropriate geographic focus in relation to global needs and/or poverty; (ii) the relationship between global public goods and local impact; (iii) approaches to partnerships and how these may differ in different areas of endeavour (approaches to the private sector, technology management, IP management, development partners); (iv) how genetic resources and policy will be handled coherently within a programmatic approach or the feasible limits to the ambition in this area; (v) how agricultural policy will be handled in the new CGIAR

We would stress again that these serious reservations provide concern not only for the final form of the document, but also for the ability of all parties to properly judge MPs and the relation of investment decisions for individual MPs to an overall portfolio. Currently, there is nothing to hang a results framework and MP monitoring system on to. It would seem impossible for the CGIAR to endorse the SRF in its present state of incompleteness.

Revisiting the strategic process

The ISPC notes that the current strategic and planning process has been less than perfect, but does not believe the CGIAR can afford to go to piecemeal planning (considering MPs one at a time) since this undermines the CGIAR renewal process and the opportunities to avoid redundancies and gain synergy from a set of revitalized programs. Even if the CGIAR continues to experiment with a small number of fast tracked MPs for piloting purposes and to establish their feasibility, the ISPC strongly recommends that a new CGIAR Strategy be formulated for immediate future needs, and more objectively than has been the case to date.

The ISPC therefore suggests that the Consortium Board appoint, as early as possible, a team to recast the CGIAR strategy. A small experienced team should be appointed with the necessary full time commitment and headed by someone knowledgeable about, but external to, the CGIAR. We note that priority setting exercises in other organizations are most usefully led by independent parties who are not proponents of the activities concerned. The ISPC expects the new external strategy team to do this work but stands ready to provide inputs on request.

The new strategy (SRF) needs to a) provide convincing rationales, not assertions, for the thematic research choices made; b) be more precise in the description and boundaries to the ambition of MPs; c) relate allocations of effort to the scope of tasks being tackled and the expectations for the contribution of results from the CGIAR to global efforts; d) be explicit about tradeoffs in research approaches and synergies that may be gained across the portfolio - and why sometimes the work is focused separately and sometimes integrated; and, e) lay out the other aspects of CGIAR strategy noted above, not simply structure.

Additionally, the ISPC expects the Consortium Board will use such a revised strategy in its decision making to hone down the current choices so that a leaner, more focused portfolio of activities can emerge.