

ICARDA's Board and Management Response to the Recommendations of the Report of the 5th External Program and Management Review

August 2006

The Board and Management of ICARDA wish to thank and express their sincere appreciation to the EPMR Panel Chair and Members for their insightful analysis and constructive comments in the review report. We agree, in general, with the recommendations made in the Panel's report. These recommendations and the many suggestions made by the Panel will provide valuable inputs as ICARDA finalizes its strategic plan, and charts its course for the future.

We are pleased to note that the Panel's overall assessment over the last five years, ICARDA, through its research for development activities, has made many substantial contributions towards alleviating poverty and enhancing food security in the CWANA region which accounts for more than 80% of non-tropical dry areas globally. It is also reassuring that the Panel felt that the Center in several ways was better placed now than when the previous EPMR was held in 1999/2000, and that its financial management was sound. This confirms the recent rating of ICARDA as 'outstanding' for its performance measurement indicators, and serves as a tribute to the management and staff of the Center.

We are also pleased that the Panel reports that in collaboration with the NARS, ICARDA has developed an excellent outreach effort through its regional programs and is an important player in the development and dissemination of agricultural knowledge in dry areas. According to the Report, everywhere NARS scientists and government officials expressed appreciation of ICARDA's scientific expertise, and support in the development of regionwide networks, projects and in capacity building including training, using existing NARS facilities.

It is also reassuring that the Panel's survey of ICARDA's donors revealed their very positive attitude and high satisfaction with ICARDA's performance.

Regarding ICARDA's inter-Center and collaborative arrangements, the Panel in general commends ICARDA's approaches to collaborative and collective action as a way to improve effectiveness and efficiency in serving its mandate for the Dry Areas eco-region.

We thank the Panel for the balance in the report between assessing past performance and charting the future course and note the practicality of the suggestions made for the future. Overall we welcome the Panel's analysis of the future challenges to the dry areas, which we supplement with the issues of climate change, gender and the prevailing geo-political environment. We would also like to express our appreciation for the excellent relations that ICARDA has with its host Governments in Syria and Lebanon.

We are pleased that the Panel views the future of ICARDA with optimism and that it perceives that there is a unique opportunity for the Center to grow and develop into a world class research institute for the Dry Areas.

Overall we welcome the Panel's proposals on future research directions to address the problems of dry areas, which will assist the Center in charting a perspective course of action for the next five years to more effectively serve the poor in the dry areas of the developing world. We appreciate the findings of the review not only in terms of the Panel's specific recommendations, but also their other suggestions. These need to be considered in their totality within the overall context of the new strategy, which has been

expressly timed to allow consideration of the EPMR's report and the views of the Center's new management. The overall financial and staffing implications of the Panel's recommendations will also need to be carefully considered. Additional capacity will be sought through partnering with national programs, advanced research institutes and, where appropriate, through outsourcing specific areas of research.

Our responses to the specific recommendations made by the Panel are given below.

In relation to ICARDA's mission

Recommendation 1: *The Center should emphasize its global mission and de-emphasize somewhat its regional mandate to become a world class research institution for the Dry Areas, for which ICARDA needs to improve its science quality.*

Response:

Accepted in principle. We share the Panel's view that ICARDA emphasizes its global ecoregional mission, focusing on the key challenges in dry areas. ICARDA will maintain its activities in Central and West Asia and North Africa (which accounts for more than 80% of the non-tropical dry areas), focusing on activities that address the underlying problems of agriculture in the dry areas and contribute to our global objectives. It is important for ICARDA to continue to build on the knowledge base gained from working in the subregions and with its vast network of partners. The balance between global emphasis and subregional needs will be a cornerstone of the new Strategic Plan.

Our commitment to science quality is paramount. It is unrelated to the geographic focus of the research and addressed under later recommendations.

In relation to the structure of the scientific program

Recommendation 2: *The Panel recommends that the current science structure consisting of six MegaProjects (MPs 1-6), that are really large programs, needs further realignment. This leads the Panel to recommend that ICARDA reconsider the readjustment of its thematic program structure along the following lines:*

Recommendation 3: *The two currently separate MPs focusing on natural resources, MP3 (on desertification) and MP1 (on water) should merge as a single Water and Land Program, while the MP3 activities on land tenure, rangelands and policy options should be integrated with work on diversification (currently MP4) and other work on socio-economics and policy be integrated in MP5.*

Recommendation 4: *The MP6 activities on knowledge management should be integrated within the other research programs and MP6 should not be a separate research program, given the priorities and dimensions of ICARDA. The Seed Unit, now in MP6, should move to MP2, while other parts of MP6 fit better in MP5 or in horizontal units.*

Response to Recommendations 2-4:

Accepted in principle. We recognize that there is scope for improvement in the thematic program structure. Decisions on the final structure will flow from the Center's new strategic plan.

***Recommendation 5:** To avoid further disruptions to researchers, the Panel recommends that the recommendations made above are considered for implementation only after new strategic plans are in place.*

Response:

Accepted. We agree with the Panel that further changes to structure should be made after the new strategic plan is in place to minimize disruption to ongoing research.

In relation to research

The Panel views that there is a need to specifically strengthen collaboration between research on water management per se and research on water policy and institutional constraints to the adoption of water conservation technologies, so as to develop strategies for improving rates of adoption.

***Recommendation 6:** The Panel recommends that MPI embraces research on water policy, institutions and adoption strategies to further enhance a very good program in water management.*

Response:

Accepted. We are conscious of the importance of policies and institutions in providing an enabling environment to enhance the adoption and impact of improved water management and conservation technologies and practices. We will further strengthen ongoing activities in these areas.

The Center has already included in its 2006-2008 Medium-term Plan outputs related to water policies and institutions. The water management research program (MP1) will continue implementing research in these aspects through collaborative activities with the Center's socio-economic program (MP5), and with national programs and other partners including IWMI and IFPRI.

Research to meet the pressing future food production requirements of the CWANA regions needs to focus on productivity improvements, and more specifically on bridging the yield gap between actual and attainable production. The Panel believes that ICARDA's efforts should be more balanced in relation to the current realities of dryland agriculture.

***Recommendation 7:** The Panel recommends increased efforts in agronomy to assist countries in bridging the yield gap between actual and attainable yields, by researching the agronomy, crop management and economic incentives required to generate the needed synergies with the breeding efforts. The Center should consider deploying the new staff at appropriate regional programs/offices of ICARDA.*

Additionally to such an effort, supporting both research on yield gaps and to conduct additional research in the areas of agroecological characterization, spatial analyses, remote sensing and related fields in natural resources management:

Response:

Accepted. ICARDA will further enhance its emphasis on agronomy and related research and will strengthen its ongoing activities and expertise to focus on producing agronomic international public goods using modeling and agroecological characterization tools. It will build on the experience gained in reducing yield gaps in several countries of the region. The specific deployment of additional staff will be decided based on the Center's new strategic plan.

***Recommendation 8:** The Panel recommends that additional investments are made in the GISU unit by providing it with sufficient scientific staff to tackle the challenges of the new Water and Land Program (Recommendation 3). It is further recommended that ICARDA should map, with the help of modeling and available data on actual yields over several years, the difference between actual yields of crops and the yields expected if the crops were limited only by water and not by disease or management.*

Response:

Accepted. We are conscious of the importance of GIS and remote sensing in research on sustainable management of natural resources, germplasm collection and conservation, poverty mapping, and in up- and out-scaling the results of its location specific work. ICARDA will seek additional resources to support the GISU in enhancing its activities and expertise in modeling and mapping and to support the analysis of yield gaps and the additional research listed under Recommendation 7.

An evaluation of the role ICARDA might play in high-value crops as a means of raising the contribution of agriculture to poverty alleviation is timely, meeting regional demands and the new Priorities of the CGIAR. The Panel has considered this issue and recommends the following strategy:

***Recommendation 9:** The Panel recommends the development of a strategy for research in horticulture by identifying the subject matter where the return on research investments would be highest in the various agroecologies of the Dry Areas. The Panel identified tree crops such as olive, almond and pistachio, as one of the most promising areas for horticultural research in the Dry Areas. The Panel believes that networking and partnering would be the most appropriate instruments for knowledge dissemination and problem solving, with ICARDA linking the NARS with advanced institutions.*

Response:

Accepted in principle. We share the Panel's view on the need to develop a Center strategy for research in horticulture with a clear focus on horticultural options that are well adapted to dry areas and which will enhance the livelihoods of resource-poor farmers. In 2002 on the request of the Board, ICARDA commissioned a study

on the desirability and feasibility of research on fruit and vegetables, which was subsequently discussed and approved by the Board. Olives, almonds and pistachio would be appropriate candidates but others such as dates, figs, pomegranates, grapes and other horticultural crops might also be considered.

The Center's strategy would define the criteria for selection of the most appropriate horticultural options for the various production systems of the dry areas and clearly define ICARDA's specific role and comparative advantages in such a research program. ICARDA agrees that networking and partnering would be the most appropriate approach

ICARDA has already established partnership in horticulture with AVRDC (the World Vegetable Center). In addition, ICARDA has been conducting research on dryland fruit trees, vegetables, and medicinal, herbal and aromatic crops over the last few years, in partnership with national programs and NGOs through specific restricted projects. The information from this initial research will be considered in developing the proposed strategy on horticultural research, which will align with the new CGIAR System Priority 3 on reducing rural poverty through agricultural diversification and emerging opportunities for high-value commodities and products.

Noting the opportunities for forage research supporting both crop-livestock systems and livelihood opportunities and goals for improved natural resource management, the Panel seeks synergies from forage research across ICARDA programs and partnerships:

Recommendation 10: *The Panel recommends that the forage (feed) legume program should be merged with one or all of the food legume programs on the basis of the cropped area, potential impact and technology transfer, similarity of species, and need for synergism among the research groups.*

Response:

Accepted. We agree with the Panel's recommendation to merge the feed/forage legume improvement program with the current food legume programs. ICARDA will revisit the staff allocation in feed and food legume improvement based on an analysis of opportunities and needs in a changing environment and in alignment with the Center's new strategic plan.

The Panel notes the large agenda for socio-economics and policy research in support of regional agriculture and the needs of ICARDA itself for impact assessment research, including the development of new methods in natural resource management impact assessment, markets etc. The Panel believes that a critical mass of social-economic researchers with required competence profiles (institutions, policy and gender among others) must be secured to allow timely delivery, continuity and high quality output. However, the allocation of some socio-economists outside MP5 does not support such efforts, and the Panel recommends that all socio-economists be hosted under MP5.

Recommendation 11: *The Panel recommends that additional staff is hired to increase the capacity of the socioeconomics Program.*

Response:

Accepted in principle. We recognize the need for additional staff to respond to the increased demand for socioeconomic, policy, gender and institutional research in the dry areas. We also recognize the value of a critical mass of socio-economists, but must ensure the continued integration of socioeconomic with biophysical research. In this regard, we will assess the merits of hosting all socio-economists under a single socio-economics program.

We plan to recruit an additional P-level position in production economics and risk analysis and to seek additional expertise in policy and institutions, gender, and marketing/competitiveness. In addition, ICARDA will continue strengthening its collaboration with other CGIAR centers, advanced research institutions and national programs. ICARDA is discussing with IFPRI the resumption of a joint appointment for research in policies and institutions.

Recommendation 12: The Panel is keenly aware that in suggesting growth in certain scientific areas, and that, if funding is not substantially increased, such changes will be at the expense of existing areas. To generate the needed resources, the Panel recommends a strategy of combining consolidation of some MPs (3 and 6), together with the consolidation of service units, and the replacement of retiring senior staff with junior scientists.

Response:

Accepted. We share the Panel's view that, if funding is not substantially increased, the growth in certain specific areas suggested in the Center's new Strategy will be at the expense of other areas. Among measures to generate the resources necessary, we agree to consolidate some MPs and Units and, as part of succession planning, to replace senior staff with junior scientists, where appropriate, while ensuring that research leadership and science quality is maintained.

In relation to science quality

To ensure the maintenance and growth of ICARDA's scientific cadre, to raise the profile of ICARDA's science and to generate links with new sources of scientific expertise, the Panel has made four interlocking recommendations on science quality (see recommendations 1, 13, 17 and 21) which should be considered in this light as well as individually:

Recommendation 13: *In cases where outputs in refereed, international journals were less than adequate, the Panel recommends an assessment of the causes for the low productivity.*

Response:

Accepted. We concur with the Panel's assessment that the output of refereed international publications is uneven across the spectrum of the Center's research. We agree with the consequent need to assess and address the causes for the differences in publication outputs among scientists. We note, however, the Panel's observation that the production of other types of publications, such as edited book chapters and monographs, by ICARDA scientists has increased in the last five years. We share the Panel's concern of the use of international refereed journal

publications as a sole indicator of science quality. We would look forward to contributing to a system-wide debate on this issue.

In relation to Governance:

The Panel finds that several Board practices and processes could be improved to enhance its governance role. Of greatest importance to the Center is to develop a strategy and implementation plan for research in the coming decade, given the changing contexts of CWANA, and new research opportunities. The Center must plan both for the implementation of research and an overall strategy for funding the strategic plan.

In the light of the foregoing the Panel recommends:

Recommendation 14: *That the Board oversees the development of a succinct strategic plan by Center management to provide clear direction to ICARDA.*

Response:

Noted: Planning for the new ICARDA Strategy was initiated by the Board in 2004 and the Strategy 2007-2016 will be concluded early in 2007. Finalization of the new Strategy was timed specifically to allow consideration of the EPMR Recommendations and the views of the new Director General.

Recommendation 15: *That the Board and management develop a donor strategy designed to increase the spread of long term grants.*

Response:

Accepted in principle. We agree with the Panel's view to develop and regularly update a Board-approved strategy for resource mobilization.

Recommendation 16: *Monitoring of the performance of the DG and Board based on the strategic goals to ensure timely implementation of the strategic plan*

Response:

Accepted. The Board is conscious of its responsibility for regular performance appraisal of the Board, Board Chair and Director General. We agree with the Panel that such performance appraisal includes monitoring of strategic goals to ensure the timely implementation of the strategic plan.

Recommendation 17: *A Board policy be developed on succession planning to ensure senior staff in key positions have a potential successor in place and that this requirement is included in the performance targets for the DG, ADGs and Directors of Finance and HR.*

Response:

Accepted in principle. We share the Panel's concern over succession planning for key senior staff positions in line with Center needs. This may not require a separate

Board policy since the Board will continue to oversee management actions in this regard.

***Recommendation 18:** Adopting a formal Board policy with a clear process for reporting inappropriate behaviour, which is communicated clearly to all staff.*

Response:

Accepted. We agree with the Panel on the need for a “whistle-blower” policy regarding unacceptable behaviour, which will be developed and communicated to staff.

***Recommendation 19:** Adopting a Board policy that the Chair of Audit Committee approves the Chair’s expenses and the Chair approves the Director General’s expenses or such policy that ensures protection for the Chair, DG and finance officers.*

Response:

Accepted. The current procedure on the expenses of the Board Chair and Director General will be updated, resulting in a Board-approved procedure.

***Recommendation 20:** That more frequent full Board meetings be organized including video conferencing.*

Response:

Accepted. As of 2007 the Board will have two regular meetings per year. Extraordinary meetings of the full Board or its Executive Committee may also be convened, if and when necessary. We will examine the practicality of video conferencing and other media.

In relation to Finance and Management:

The Panel notes that whilst the Center has carried out CCERs on scientific and capacity building aspects of the Center’s activities, the Panel has not recently evaluated its management and finance practices. Given the change in management, the Panel believes it would be timely for the Board to commission such a CCER with an emphasis on the recommendation to the new management of best practices to be followed in the future. The Panel provides advice for the focusing of such a CCER:

***Recommendation 21:** ICARDA conduct a CCER on Management and Finance to investigate and provide best practice to ICARDA Management on:*

- (i) The Finance Department’s role within the wider ICARDA body*
- (ii) The HR strategy to attract and retain the highest calibre staff with fair and transparent performance management systems.*

Response:

Accepted. We agree with the Panel's recommendation to have a CCER on Management and Finance to assess and provide best practices to ICARDA management including the role of Finance within the wider ICARDA body and an HR strategy to attract and retain high caliber staff.

The CCER will include the issues raised by the Panel and will be conducted prior to the 2007 Board Meeting.

***Recommendation 22:** Given the dispersed nature of ICARDA's research activities, the Panel also recommends that External audits should routinely include visits and reviews of the regional and outreach centers, at least on a random (selective) or rotational basis.*

Response:

Accepted: We share the Panel's view that the External Auditors will routinely review the Center's regional and outreach offices on a selective or rotational basis, in addition to the regular reviews by our internal audit.