

## 2. Strategic Planning in the Management System of CGIAR Centers

Strategic planning has always had a place in the management systems of CGIAR Centers. However, the rationale and role for planning, and the way it has been implemented, has changed over time and will continue changing in future.

### 2.1 The Past and Present Planning System and its Underlying Assumptions

Strategic planning and priority setting, in the present planning system in most CGIAR Centers, is reflected in the long-term strategic plan. In most cases this document was developed on the basis of expert knowledge and particular studies. Formerly, external consultants often drew up these plans until the need for more and varied partnerships led the Centers to involve stakeholders through consultations.

The long term strategic plan affects planning at lower levels e.g. at the regional level, at program level, or at times around commodities or environmental systems. These lower level plans are thus supposed to focus the strategic plan on given units. They are exemplified by medium-term plans, developed with a three to five year horizon, which are then operationalised through annual work plans.

In recent years, a major modification has emerged through donor pressure to introduce log frames. Many Centers have made use of this tool to advantage to make the different planning levels more coherent with clear interfaces (cascading log frames).

This general planning system has been in place for a long time, in some cases having been developed more than two to three decades ago under a set of assumptions and criteria which need to be revisited in a changing environment. Some of those assumptions were:

- The understanding of CGIAR Centers as being ‘centers of excellence in science’ with mandates that focused on the provision of upstream research on

clearly defined commodities.

- That Center mandates were relatively narrow and defined the focus and priorities. In fact, the mandate itself was already a clear prioritization at a level above an individual Center.
- The products of science were seen as high quality peer-reviewed publications on commodities and their environment, based on data gathered from controlled experiments. Another category of major product was the prototype technology which was to be delivered to research agents who would take it further through downstream research, and to extension agents who should have spread the messages. The role of CGIAR Centers in the research and development (R&D) continuum was clearly outlined.
- That all the other parts of the innovation system (NARS and extension agents) were functioning and performing their mandated jobs which would ensure the delivery of the products of CGIAR to spread downstream through these agents.
- The Centers and the other partners had a high degree of commonality in objectives and control over the factors governing pathways for delivery (partly encouraged through direct financing of partners’ services to CGIAR projects).

The progressive changes in expectation and environment have left many of the assumptions above untenable.

### 2.2 Challenges for Strategic Planning in the Future are Shared by Most Centers and Planning Levels

The recognition of an increasing complexity in the problems to be solved has rendered reductionist and linear approaches and methods ineffective, and often even counterproductive. While in the 1960s the problems related to one commodity, in the 1970s they had already begun to relate to the production system. In the 1980s the problem was seen more broadly within

the farming system and in the 1990s, within livelihood and food security systems. Currently, research is required to deal with poverty alleviation and its effectiveness is to be measured in terms of impact on poverty reduction. The change in the level of complexity of the problem to be dealt with has increased exponentially, whereas the research responses have often remained rather simple and linear.

This has posed many challenges to the planning systems:

- The strong pressure to produce impacts on poverty reduction implies a high responsibility of the Centers for the impacts downstream – which are predominantly outside the classical research areas. Therefore the planning has to take into account complex actor and innovation systems. However, CGIAR research, as only one minor actor, has little direct control over these variables. Planning requires the development of greater ownership by the many actors in order to achieve common purpose in research, dissemination and implementation functions. Planning is thus much more than producing a plan; it is part of a strategy to get the actors to develop a vision and to identify the required interfaces, roles, relationships and boundaries in an evolving manner. It needs to include a process of ‘organising’ the players and learning to play the roles<sup>1</sup>.
- The mandates, roles and boundaries of the Centers in dealing with such a complex environment are being widened. Approaches need to become more interdisciplinary and integrated as no one single discipline can solve the envisaged problems. Some of the research concepts – like integrated natural resources management (INRM) – work in different, process-oriented, non-linear paradigms which cannot be planned in a linear mode. Planning thus

needs to deal with ‘new science’ approaches, the combination of concept development (with new conceptual frameworks and modes of integration) and the actual planning of actions. It needs to deal with process rather than programmatic procedures.

- The rapid changes (in science, technology and economic globalization) require a much better understanding of the external environment to define priorities and abilities to adapt. The challenge is to keep focus while reacting flexibly to a highly dynamic milieu.
- Changes in the mode of funding and pressure by donors have made the ‘grand plan’ obsolete. The more volatile and competitive funding environment, and variability of project funds beyond three year cycles, have resulted in a survival pressure and swings towards more readily fundable activities. This has sometimes led to a “disconnect” between the strategic plan and the operational plan/reality. Planning therefore needs to generate a clear focus, while allowing for permitted deviations – a ‘flexible frame’
- Earlier, strategic planning was predominantly seen as a task of research managers. Within the changing environment as outlined above, each and every researcher, even every technician, has to be aware of the external environment and to engage in strategic thinking and planning processes as a means to continuously improve effectiveness and impact. As well as questioning the overall planning process, this challenges the role and profile of scientists and other staff to plan and deliver agricultural research for human development.

In light of the changes described above, the present document examines some of the key elements of strategic planning processes that are required.

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1 Hagmann, J. Learning Wheel® – Creating common learning frames for joint action: a workshop methodology for conceptualizing experiences among multiple stakeholders towards learning together (In press). (More information: Jhagmann@aol.com)