

Getting there – steps toward greater influence of civil society on agricultural research: an NGOC perspective on the CGIAR Mid-Term Meeting in Durban

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Civil society organisations lobbying for change are very much in the international news these days, but not always appearing with the most civil face. The NGO (Non-Governmental Organisation) Committee of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) has opted to take an approach to change based on the following principles:

- take small steps but unrelentingly
- seek allies among a small number of committed people, also within the CGIAR, to help find a way together
- be agile and flexible in taking advantage of small openings and trying to make them wider.

After the Mid-Term Meeting (MTM) of the CGIAR held in late May 2001 in Durban, South Africa, the NGO Committee feels that it is gradually “getting there” in its efforts, together with like-minded organisations and individuals, to increase the influence of civil society on international agricultural research.

The start

In the mid-1990s, the CGIAR system began opening up to a wider range of potential partners in a more structured way than at any other time since its establishment in 1971. In 1995, the NGO Committee was created as a partnership committee in the CGIAR. In 1996, the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) was founded to provide a platform of discussion for the major stakeholders, including NGOs and farmers, and to promote partnerships between them. Efforts are being made to build up subregional and regional fora on agricultural research for development, which are supposed to involve all stakeholder groups. The GFAR and the CGIAR are collaborating in an approach to defining agricultural research agendas that starts with identification of subregional and regional priorities.

The NGO Committee and various civil society organisations (CSOs) concerned with agricultural and international development have been following this process with interested but critical eyes. We realise that it is new and complex and that there is still much to learn, and we have been continuously pointing out to the CGIAR and the GFAR where the weaknesses are. Thus far, the involvement of NGOs and small-farmer organisations (SFOs) in the subregional and regional fora has been little more than symbolic. The meetings are dominated by scientists from national agricultural research institutes (NARIs). But we also recognise our own weaknesses and our need to grow and mature as informed CSOs in coordinated action so that we can have a positive and meaningful influence in discussions of international research for development.

In recent years, donor support for agricultural research has been stagnating or even declining and criticism has become louder that the work of the 16 agricultural research centres supported by the CGIAR has not been sufficiently focused on alleviating hunger and poverty while safeguarding the environment. At International

Centres Week in October 2000, the CGIAR called in a Change Design and Management Team (CDMT) to propose ways to refocus and restructure the research system. The CDMT consulted with the “shareholders” (countries, foundations and international organisations) that fund the System and with the various “stakeholders”, i.e. the constituencies that have a stake in the implementation and outcomes of the research. It drew up recommendations in an open and iterative manner, making use of e-mail and the internet to inform stakeholders and invite comments, which it worked into three drafts of a report before presenting the final version at MTM in May 2001.

The path to Durban

Already before the CDMT started its work, the NGO Committee has been organising activities to allow diverse civil-society voices to be heard more clearly by the CGIAR. The activities include information dissemination primarily via e-mail; international workshops on topics such as research partnerships and scaling-up local initiatives in ecological agriculture; and regional meetings designed to raise the awareness of NGOs and SFOs about the need and opportunities to ensure that publicly funded agricultural research benefits small-scale poor farmers. These activities were stepped up especially in the months leading up to MTM2001, with financial and moral support given above all by the Ford Foundation but also through some funds from the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation, the German development agency Misereor, the GFAR and the World Bank via the CGIAR Secretariat.

The NGOC organised a two-week electronic conference in January 2001, involving about 250 people from civil society, including some committed individuals in some of the international agricultural research centres of the CGIAR. The views expressed in this conference were made known to the CDMT through the NGOC representative in the Steering Group for the change process. The e-conference outputs were also discussed by about 30 people from NGOs, SFOs and universities who met in Frankfurt, Germany, in mid-May 2001. This workshop issued a “CSO Declaration for Durban” that outlined the type of farmer-led agro-ecological research that was needed to fulfil the mandate of the CGIAR and that commented on the seven major recommendations of the CDMT. With the aid of electronic communication, this declaration in English and Spanish was widely disseminated and was signed by 80 CSOs in time to distribute it to the 400 participants in the MTM in Durban the following week. It is still circulating for further endorsements. (It can be found on the NGOC webpage – see address at end of this paper).

The Frankfurt workshop also started to develop an “insider/outsider” strategy to influence research and proposed the creation of an International Alliance for Agricultural Research and Development as a broader outside group of CSOs that could collaborate with the NGOC.

The two African members of the nine-person NGOC organised a meeting of Eastern and Southern African NGOs and SFOs on agricultural research and development, held immediately before MTM at the same venue in Durban. It was attended by over 40 persons from Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe and the NGO Committee. The objectives were to share information on activities in agricultural research and development, identify key research issues in Eastern and Southern Africa, and identify mechanisms for better communication among stakeholders in agricultural research in the region. The

participants were informed about the CGIAR, GFAR, NGO Committee and the current process of setting regional research priorities. The participants saw a need to put more emphasis on creating space for CSOs – especially SFOs and local development-support NGOs – to influence research at the national level, prior to doing so at the subregional and regional levels. They called for national agricultural research fora, including all stakeholders, as well as national civil-society councils on agricultural research and development to strengthen and give more legitimacy to the civil-society representatives in the national fora.

A press statement from the Durban NGO/SFO workshop was released and was distributed to all participants in MTM, along with the declaration from the Frankfurt workshop and an open letter from the NGO Committee (see NGOC webpage). This letter highlighted the need for “three Rs”: Regional restructuring of international agricultural research, Real participation in priority setting, and Representation of stakeholders in governance of the CGIAR.

The Mid-Term Meeting

During MTM, the discussions revolved around four major recommendations of the CDM Team:

1. to organise research increasingly around independently governed “Global Challenge Programs” (GCPs) designed to address development concerns and involving partners beyond the international research centres, and to channel at least half of CGIAR funds through GCPs within five years’ time
2. to replace the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of the CGIAR by a smaller Science Council composed of high-level science policy strategists with fewer administrative functions than the TAC and supported by global and regional pools of experts in science and development, including ethical and biosafety concerns
3. to create an Executive Council of “shareholders” (donors) to carry forward decisions between annual general meetings, eliminating the Mid-Term Meeting and eliminating several CGIAR committees
4. to establish a Systems Office to cater for donors, international research centres and GCPs and to coordinate a comprehensive communication and public awareness program.

Many of the participants in the NGO/SFO workshop stayed on in Durban for MTM and were very active in preparing and distributing statements, discussing informally with CGIAR members (donors), making comments in small-group and plenary sessions, and briefing the press. Particularly some of the Southern African participants made strong contributions to this work. Individuals from the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) based in Canada and the German NGO Forum Environment and Development (in German, Forum Umwelt und Entwicklung, FUE) also organised a lunch meeting where they presented the RAFI Occasional Paper *In Search of Common Ground II: Can Dinosaurs Make Teammates?* that commented on the CDM Team’s report (see <http://www.rafi.org>). The FUE also distributed its report on the international workshop of NGOs and SFOs on research for poverty alleviation that had been held immediately before the GFAR and MTM in May 2000 in Dresden, Germany.

NGO views on change proposals. The general gist of the NGO arguments on the four major points for MTM discussion was as follows:

1. The concept of multi-stakeholder research programs focused on major development challenges was welcomed, but strong links were needed to civil society in the design, planning, governance, implementation and evaluation of these programs. It was not clear how the GCPs would be identified, especially how the process of their identification would be linked to the processes already underway of setting regional research priorities.
2. The inclusion of development, ethical and biosafety concerns in the proposal to enhance science output through creation of a Science Council was welcomed, but that this should be renamed Science and Development Policy council and should include the above-mentioned expertise in the Council itself instead of only in the global and regional pools of experts being consulted
3. The Executive Council as the principle governance body of the CGIAR should be composed not purely of “shareholders” but should include representatives of the major actors in agricultural research and development
4. The concentration of certain functions in a Systems Office may lead to efficiency gains but this move towards centralisation of management should be counterbalanced by greater emphasis on regional governance and implementation of CGIAR-supported activities.

The greatest change being proposed was the shift to GCPs, and there were considerable misgivings among NGOs and SFOs that the international research centres would take advantage of their relatively strong ties with donors to capture the funds for programs identified by the centres. These misgivings grew during the course of MTM, when presentations on the CGIAR program on climate change, water management, and impact of disease on livestock production and trade were made as if they were candidates for GCPs. Only the presentation on Integrated Natural Resources Management (INRM) stressed that this was not regarded as a GCP but rather as central to all work supported by the CGIAR.

At a lunchtime meeting on the ecoregional programmes of the CGIAR, NGO views were presented. A plea was made to build the GCPs on these experiences, in which the CG Centres are gradually beginning to learn how to plan and implement development-oriented research in collaboration with NARIs, universities, NGOs and – in some cases – farmer organisations, rather than creating new programmes from scratch.

Seeking genuine participation in research priority setting. In GFAR meetings prior to and during MTM, several people from NGOs – in addition to the official NGO representative on the Steering Committee of the GFAR – argued for genuine participation of NGOs and SFOs in the subregional and regional processes of defining research priorities. Members of the NGOC pursued this aim also in informal meetings with key people in the GFAR Secretariat. Together with a representative from Via Campesina, an international organisation of small-scale family farmers, the NGOC reached an agreement with the GFAR to initiate a pilot exercise of research priority setting by NGOs and SFOs in Central America. This will run parallel to the process already underway primarily with NARIs in that region and the two processes will eventually be integrated.

Responsive CGIAR. The four major proposals of the CDMT were discussed in working groups open to all participants. The NGO people participating in MTM divided themselves among the four groups in order to make sure that NGO views

would be expressed in each case. Not only NGOs and SFOs but also several donors of the CGIAR criticised the original MTM agenda to discuss and reach decisions on the four proposals in closed sessions involving only CGIAR members. The CGIAR Chair and Secretariat made the wise move to open up the first closed session (for discussion of recommendations) to all participants and to invite representatives of civil society and the private sector to take part in the second closed session (for decision-making). The CGIAR Chair was also quick to listen to criticism that the Chairs of the partnership committees and regional research organisations were being treated like “backbenchers” without their own microphones during the large plenary sessions, and arranged within short order that microphones were set up for them.

When composition of the Interim Executive Council was discussed in the sole closed session, several donor countries and sponsors of the CGIAR spoke in favour of including not only representatives of the donors but also the Chairs of the Centre Directors Committee (CDC), the Committee of Centre Board Chairs (CBC), the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC), the NGO Committee (NGOC), the Private Sector Committee (PSC) and the GFAR. Moreover, they wanted these persons to be included not merely as observers but as full members of the Council.

The NGOC Chair suggested that one of the tasks of the Interim Executive Council should be to develop a mechanism for farmer representation in the CGIAR, i.e. a Farmers’ Committee. As there was not yet a structure for direct representation of farmers, it seemed more realistic to ask that this be set up when the future Executive Council would be established in October 2001 – i.e. taking one step at a time. This was included in the note on decisions as a key point to consider, albeit watered down to: “The Council should examine how to improve representation of farmers’ perspectives in the CGIAR”.

The CGIAR decisions

The CGIAR decided to incorporate a programmatic approach to research planning and funding and to initiate the formulation of Challenge Programs (dropping “Global” to avoid the negative connotations of this word and to make clear that also regional programs would be possible). It agreed to meet only once a year at an Annual General Meeting (AGM) and to create an Executive Council to bear responsibilities delegated to it by the CGIAR members. An Interim Executive Council (IEC) was set up, consisting of the Co-Sponsors (World Bank, FAO and UNDP), the CGIAR Director, members of the Oversight and Finance Committees, and the Chairs of the CBC, CDC, TAC, NGOC, PSC and GFAR. It was agreed that the TAC be transformed into a Science Council and that a System Office be established with an integrated communication and fund-raising strategy.

The IEC was given the tasks of presenting proposals for approval by CGIAR members at the first AGM in October 2001 in Washington DC on:

- the composition of the future Executive Council, i.e. after October 2001, and its working procedures
- the process for defining and formulating the Challenge Programs
- the creation of the Science Council hosted, like TAC in the past, by the FAO
- the functions and modalities of the System Office.

As there was no opportunity for stakeholders to comment on the decisions in the plenary, RAFI and FUE prepared a flyer entitled “CDMT – Can Donors Manage

Transition” with a cartoon showing three “donorsaurus” presenting the four decisions to their Tyrannosaurus “Treasury” Rex. This was distributed to all MTM participants. In the daily news on MTM prepared by Susanne Gura of FUE for electronic distribution to CSOs, it was stated that: “Some donors felt that the good contributions CSOs made so far would be endangered by such mockery, and that the conservatives among the delegates would find more reasons for their position not to include CSOs in CGIAR governance”.

Many NGOs in Durban were somewhat surprised to find that the CGIAR is more ready to listen than some of us thought and that the small open crack we were trying to get through could be widened with apparent ease – to the extent that we were in danger of falling flat on our faces. There is often a tendency among NGOs to regard the CGIAR as the enemy instead of a vitally needed international organisation which has a mandate to alleviate poverty and hunger and which is gradually learning to work with other stakeholders in order to do so. Opposition of the CGIAR to inclusion of NGOs was not as great as many had expected. However, in addition to the allies that supported the demands of the NGOs, there are undeniably still conservative elements in the CGIAR and we need to be careful that they do not find the bricks to block up the openings.

Further steps

The first meeting of the IEC was on the final day of MTM, 25 May 2001. The CGIAR Chair, Ian Johnson, had facilitated open and inclusive discussions during MTM. This refreshing style continued in the IEC meeting, when he gave ample opportunity for all voices to be heard – whether of “shareholders” or “stakeholders” – and exhibited great patience, even at the end of a long and tiring week, to repeat and explain and check once again whether everyone agreed.

However, during this meeting, it became obvious that the “victory” of the NGOs in gaining entrance to this governing body is very fragile. Two of the three options for the future composition of the Executive Council that were presented by the CGIAR Secretariat for consideration by the IEC were restricted solely to donor representatives – without any voice from civil society. Moreover, it was necessary that some IEC members point out once again that the CGIAR members had approved only that the *process* for developing and approving Challenge Programs was to be defined by October 2001 – and not specific programs.

It will be extremely important that CSOs concerned with agricultural research and development follow the process of decision-making during this critical interim phase and demonstrate through their arguments and actions that the CGIAR will benefit from opening up further to civil-society involvement in the Executive Council, in the Science (and Development Policy) Council and in definition and governance of the Challenge Programs. If we keep taking small steps, unrelentingly, towards making publicly funded research accountable to the constituencies it is supposed to serve, then not only the intermediate organisations such as NGOs and universities but also the farmers will gradually get there.

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The official end of meeting report from the CGIAR can be accessed via the CGIAR website: <http://www.cgiar.org>. Further information about the NGOC, its activities and papers can be found on the NGOC webpage: <http://infoperu.org/ngoc-cgiar> (soon to be transferred to an independent site: <http://www.ngoc-cgiar.org>)