

Governance in international agricultural research – time for change

Participatory breeding of crops valuable to small farmers in marginal areas of the tropics is not the mainstream research activity of the sixteen research centres in the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). With some exceptions in the form of model projects, the research conducted by the centres is focused on Green Revolution agriculture with biotechnology included recently. Small farmers have benefitted little from this approach as they have different needs and apparently do not see its relevance to increase food production. If research priority setting would be done at regional level, and if regional cooperation and participation of small farmers would become a more basic organisational principle, the poor in these areas could probably benefit more from international agricultural research than they did in the past three decades. Many Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) therefore call for regionalisation of agricultural research.

Although the CGIAR has made certain politically important moves, notably by putting its genebanks under the auspices of FAO, by supporting action against biopiracy and by rejecting the Terminator technology, they have not looked into the negative aspects of Green Revolution agriculture. With pressure increasing after the UNCED in Rio in 1992, a "Renewal" was launched, and at the end of the 1990s, a "System Review" questioned the whole CGIAR system. But few changes have resulted.

To increase the relevance of its research to small farmers, the CGIAR took the initiative of organising the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR) in Dresden, Germany, 21-23 May 2000. Many CSOs as well as the world's largest organisation of small farmers, La Via Campesina, joined the meeting in a sceptical but constructive mood. The rare opportunity to discuss on equal level with scientists from formal research organisations was considered valuable. They were somewhat sobered when their distinctly different position, especially on modern biotechnologies, was levelled out in a Global Vision, and their offers to collaborate were hardly noticed. However, they backed the idea to have Regional Fora and a Global Forum, where research priorities were to be set, and opted for including development issues in the Fora (1).

A year later, in May 2001, "Change" was on the agenda of the CGIAR biannual meeting of its members, the Northern donor governments and foundations, and a number of Southern governments. Yet, the decisions taken in Durban, South Africa, point to more centralisation, not regionalisation. Part of the future research was to be organised around "Challenge Programmes". And new topics were presented - the impact of climate change on agriculture; water management; and the impact of disease on livestock production and trade – in order to attract new funding, even before a priority setting process was carried out in the regions.

More centralisation is likely to come from the three other structural decisions:

- To abolish one of the two annual CGIAR member meetings, and to establish an Executive Council administered from the World Bank, Washington. The Interim Executive Council consists of a limited number of "shareholders" (CGIAR/GFAR terminology for donors), and representatives of Centres, GFAR,

industry and NGOs. Small farmer organisations (SFOs) do not have a seat. The rest of the donors may come as observers, making the poorer South less likely to afford attendance at the foreseen two to three yearly meetings.

- To abolish the FAO-based Technical Advisory Committee, which had a budgetary say and carried out strategic research planning and impact assessment. These functions will most likely be attached to the Executive Council. The functions of the new FAO-based Science Council are under consideration; in the worst case, they may be limited to peer reviewing.
- To increase power to Washington with a new System Office that provides services to the Centres, especially for public awareness and fundraising. The existing CGIAR Secretariat will probably be integrated into this Office.

CSOs presented their ideas on a regionalised agricultural research system, where the role of the CGIAR would be catalytic (2, 3). This was strongly supported not only by the regional research organisations, but also from many donors. Regional priority setting is important to the CGIAR and its donors. But, the GFAR chair R.K. Paroda could report only very slow progress. Broadening the participation from national agricultural research institutes to include other "stakeholders" (CGIAR/GFAR terminology for constituencies), like farmer organisations and NGOs seems to be especially difficult. The CSO regional contact persons who were nominated in Dresden have been only marginally involved. In Central America, two parallel processes are developing: La Via Campesina and the NGO Committee have started regional priority setting by SFOs and NGOs, in addition to the Regional Forum. The GFAR has announced its readiness to integrate the two.

Participation of CSOs at the final CGIAR Mid-Term Meeting in Durban was higher than ever before. The NGO Committee of the CGIAR, after arranging an electronic conference early this year, held an international CSO/SFO workshop in Frankfurt, Germany, that produced a "CSO Declaration for Durban" signed by eighty CSOs (2). An African NGO workshop in Durban, likewise organised by the NGO Committee, supported the issue with a declaration and a press statement; many of the 40 participants were active during the Mid-Term Meeting. The Canadian-based RAFI and the German NGO "Forum Environment and Development" presented a joint paper (3) and commented on the Durban decisions when the meeting ended. CSOs will continue to advocate for the regionalisation of the CGIAR in preparation of the International Centres' Week (renamed the Annual General Meeting) in October 2001.

Susanne Gura, German NGO Forum Environment and Development, c/o Burghofstrasse 116, D-53229 Bonn, Germany. Phone: +49 228 948 0670; Fax: +49 228 976 4777; Email: gura@forumue.de; <http://www.forumue.de>

References

- 1 - German NGO Forum Environment & Development: **Food For All – Farmers First In Research**. International Workshop of Non-Government and Small Farmer Organisations on Research for Poverty Alleviation, Dresden, Germany, 19-20 May 2000. Workshop report, Bonn, Germany, October 2000. An NGO report on GFAR 2000 is included.
- 2 - A respective CSO Declaration for Durban signed by more than eighty CSOs was distributed together with a statement of African NGOs.
- 3 - **In Search of Firmer Ground**, RAFI Occasional Paper, 19 October 2000; RAFI and German NGO Forum Environment and Development: **In Search of Common Ground II**. CDMT - Can Dinosaurs Make Teammates? May 2001.