

SCIENCE COUNCIL OF THE CGIAR

Commentary on the Meta-Evaluation of EPMRs

28 September 2007

The Science Council discussed the report of the Meta-Evaluation of the EPMRs at the 8th Science Council meeting, at Bioversity International. The members of the meta-evaluation Panel, *Howard Elliott* and *Maureen Robinson* gave an overview of the study and presented the key findings. In addition to the items in the TOR to identify common issues with System level significance and implications, and to assess the overall quality and comparability of the reports and the EPMR process, the Panel was asked to explore whether EPMRs could minimize the need for additional donor reviews. This study, suggested by ExCo and commissioned by the SC, covered 11 EPMRs from 2004-06 and, in addition to the review documents, drew from interviews with donors, Director Generals, Panel Chairs, the CGIAR and the SC Secretariats.

The report is a pioneering effort to take stock of the EPMRs and it contains valuable information on the experience with EPMRs and on results emerging from this type of review. The need for it derived from ExCo's request to have a meta-analysis of the lessons learnt from EPMRs. The study report, despite its title, represents an evaluation synthesis. The study draws heavily from the EPMR Panel reports, but seems to have paid less attention to the other components of the EPMR reports, namely the Centers' responses to EPMR recommendations, the SC and CGIAR Secretariat commentaries and the final recommendations from ExCo and the Group. Furthermore, the study would have benefited from using an evaluation framework based on best practices in this area.¹ However, a great variety of issues are considered in this study and the report includes several insights that will be useful for the SC, the Centers and the CGIAR System. The SC thanks the Panel members for the review which contains important suggestions for the CGIAR to improve monitoring and evaluation in the future.

The Panel made 12 key findings that are elaborated through observations, endorsement of several on-going practices and suggestions for improvement that the SC in general agrees with. The report would have benefited from an explicit list of recommendations; they are alluded to but provided only in an Annex and only for improving and streamlining the EPMR process. This commentary focuses on the function of the EPMR within the overall monitoring and evaluation context and the Panel's key findings on the programmatic content of EPMRs.

The Panel endorsed the EPMRs by and large as they currently exist. The Panel concluded that outsourcing of the EPMRs or establishing a separate evaluation group would not make the EPMRs more independent than they currently are. It emphasized that the EPMRs, instead of becoming simply audits of the other monitoring and evaluation components, as

¹ Best practices are presented for example in a recent sourcebook by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group.

suggested in the CGIAR current M&E Policy, should maintain their strategic and holistic overview of the entire Center, as part of an integrated evaluation system. The SC agrees with this view. The Panel found that, although the donors do not see a direct link between the EPMRs and their funding decisions and, in general, do not see the EPMRs replacing or reducing their own evaluations, they consider them essential for the overall credibility of the System.

The Panel felt that the EPMRs should have a broader view of how the Center fits into the system as a whole. In the EPMRs the Center is the unit of analysis and the EPMR panels seldom formulate recommendations that go beyond the Center's power to resolve. In order to increase the utility of the reviews the SC was advised to include in the Terms of Reference questions relevant for a system-level perspective and for the de-centralized partnership mode under which the Centers operate. Furthermore, while partners are consulted during the review, the process should include steps to provide feed-back of the results of the reviews, which is currently missing.

In Annex 5, the report includes several recommendations to guide and standardize the approaches for assuring the quality and consistency of the reports, such as careful and timely selection of the Panel Chair, maintaining the presence of a Panel Secretary and making a realistic estimation of the time needed for a good review. The report identified many areas in which the EPMR process can be enhanced. The SC will consider these suggestions and revise the present Guidelines for conducting EPMRs and the CGIAR's overall policy for M&E in order to maximise the benefit from the analysis. Some areas for consideration include the following:

More efficiency in the planning and management of the M&E system

The study referred to an integrated CGIAR system for planning and evaluation including MTPs, PM, CCERs and EPMRs, and it points out that the EPMRs should not be merely an "audit of audits". Although the SC found the Panel's analysis of this system somewhat limited, it agrees with the Panel that while each component can support the others, each is needed in its own right. The SC is strengthening the MTP as the key planning tool that can provide an input to M&E. It plans to prepare a strategy for M&E to describe the roles and limitations of the different components (CCERs, PM, EPMR) in order to help make their use more efficient. It will also address an issue that the Panel mentioned has arisen in several recent EPMRs and that is the need for Centers to prepare business plans to link their priorities and the resource allocation/mobilization strategies to implement them. The SC emphasizes that the CCERs are primarily an internal self-evaluation mechanism which can also assist in the EPMR process. It hopes that the EPMR teams' assessment of the quality of the CCER input into the independent evaluation of the EPMR will result in pressure on how well the CCERs are conducted. There is room for better development of CCERs through better Terms of Reference which address science quality and science management of segments of the Center's program. CCERs could be better planned on schedules which provide periodic input into Center management during the inter-EPMR period, rather than piling them before the EPMR which increases apparent stress and the feeling of being over-reviewed. The SC concurs with the Panel in encouraging Boards to become more engaged in the MTP and CCER planning and commissioning processes.

Consistency and comparability of EPMRs

The report devotes attention to the issue of the consistency and comparability of EPMRs, particularly in the Section on *Ensuring Relevant and Quality Programs*. The Panel's approach was more systematic in considering the EPMRs' assessment of the quality of science than other areas of the EPMRs. It did not evaluate the EPMR reports retrospectively but used its observations for suggesting improvements in the future. It would have been useful to conduct an analysis of the EPMRs' terms of reference and guidelines. It is likely that this would have shown that the standard TORs, while requesting the EPMRs to address the same set of key program and management questions, do not explicitly request EPMRs to collect similar data or information for their analysis; something which would allow a more quantitatively oriented and systematic meta-analysis. However, the SC notes that in the EPMR guidelines, reference is made to a standard set of criteria for assessment of Center quality that all EPMRs should use.

In order to increase the comparability of the EPMRs and the possibility of conducting internal and external benchmarking exercises (inter-temporal comparisons for a single center and comparisons among centers), for instance within the context of the PM system, the SC plans to consider the experiences from international practice of introducing ratings into the EPMRs. The SC will also consider ways in which the key issues (relevance, quality of research, outputs and outcomes) can be more uniformly assessed to make the EPMRs more comparable.

The SC believes that it would have been useful to include in the report an assessment of the quality of the EPMRs' recommendations. The CGIAR system includes an important follow-up mechanism of EPMR recommendations through the MTP reporting. To improve the effectiveness of the EPMRs, including their follow-up, three questions may help in assessing and in framing EPMR recommendations: Are the recommendations evidence-based? Are they sufficiently clear? Are the recommendations actionable?

Another item that also relates to the consistency of EPMRs but is missing in the report is the way in which EPMRs have reviewed partnerships, which have become increasingly important to the Centers. There are four key issues that should be considered in a review of partnerships that could be expected from all EPMRs: i) relevance, ii) efficacy, iii) efficiency (with particular attention paid to transaction costs) and iv) exit strategy.

Independence of EPMRs

In its interviews with EPMR stakeholders, the Panel tested perceived advantages of outsourcing the EPMR but found no support for that. However, the Panel identified some concerns regarding the SC and the CGIAR Secretariat guiding and briefing the EPMR panels. This report emphasizes the need to maintain as much as possible the independent nature of the process. The SC agrees with this advice and feels that perceptions about control over the EPMR to some extent can be addressed by elaborating and providing rationale for the list of the SC's strategic issues that supplement the standard TOR. The SC can also be clearer about how it uses both the Center and the CGIAR member input in compiling the list of issues. However, it should also be taken into account that reviews/evaluations generate inevitable tensions. One of the challenges of EPMR Chairs is to deal with these tensions. The SC suggests adding to the report's otherwise useful discussion of characteristics of an EPMR

Chair the capacity to handle tensions, something that could be called “emotional intelligence”, as desirable in the Chair’s profile.

EPMRs and donors/investors reviews

The report states that “separate donor evaluations are inevitable, and do not substitute for EPMRs. They are usually more focused, partial in their perspective”. Nevertheless the SC considers that it may be worthwhile to explore with donors new ways to enhance their commitment to harmonization of reviews, which has been indicated in the “Paris declaration”. Drawing from others’ experiences in joint evaluation (OECD has documented such experiences) it may be worthwhile to consider a pilot trial EPMR involving key donors. This may not only diminish transaction costs for the Centers (a key concern highlighted by the Alliance) but it may also be a way of allowing the donors/investor to have a more holistic view of the Center’s experience. The SC finds the report’s view of the possibilities for a more active role of the donors in the EPMRs rather narrow and the conclusion that little can or needs be done to harmonize and rationalize external reviewing of Centers. There is an enabling environment to experiment with new ways of involving donors, and the payoff can be important for the CGIAR system. The SC is quite optimistic that donors can be encouraged to structure their review requirements more and make better use of the opportunities to contribute to the planning of the EPMRs.

Performance measurement and resource allocation

The report considers that the performance measurement system will provide a strong incentive for measuring and documenting performance, with a positive impact on EPMR panels’ evaluations of science quality. It asserts that there is evidence that the PMS is improving the rigor of the MTPs. The incentive for this improvement is that a portion of the World Bank contribution (currently 50%) is based on a set of agreed performance indicators relating to program outcomes, management and governance. The Panel is concerned that the PMS does not sufficiently reward initiatives that improve the coherence of the System, which would be even more of a problem if other donors begin to base contributions on the PMS indicators. The SC agrees that the PM does not capture all elements of performance that may be relevant. It feels that although a link between PMS and resource allocation seems to make sense, experience has shown that making this link too explicit and mechanical may introduce perverse incentives and moral hazards for quality of the reporting, leading to “gaming” in the system. There is need to improve the PM indicators and to provide guidance in their use. Therefore the SC considers that the PMS still has weaknesses for being used by the EPMRs as direct evidence of good performance, at least in some aspects. The SC recommends that donors should consider both EPMRs and the PMS to make performance- *informed* allocation decisions rather than basing the decisions mechanistically on *reported* performance.

Common programmatic issues

The SC found the Panel discussion on the key programmatic issues somewhat fragmented. Of the many possible issues, the Panel focused three that they found reoccurring and at the same time complex.

- The discussion of policy-oriented, socio-economic and institutional research is interesting in the light of the concerns presented in EPMR reports and elsewhere of the current status of socio-economic research in the CGIAR that the SC intends to address through a

stripe review. Reflecting the Panel's concerns, the stripe review is planned to embrace more than the agricultural economics component of social science.

- In the section *Managing Complex Interactions* the Panel discussed the issues of positioning the Centers within the research-development continuum, development of international vs. regional public goods, and the increasingly de-centralised system in which Centers operate, with the associated problems of overlapping mandates. The SC is aware of the rich resource of informed opinions for the System as whole in each of the EPMRs. The idea of raising the perspective of the EPMRs above just the Center level, for example through more systematic inclusion in the TOR of issues of broad relevance for the CGIAR as a whole, is certainly worth considering. The Panel has provided a few such examples. However, the Panel's recommendations to use an innovation systems framework for positioning the Centers strategically in the global system as an alternative to the pursuit of IPGs, and for the SC to elaborate further the use of the innovation systems approach, do not derive from a clear analysis and appear isolated from the report's other discussion on programmatic issues. The innovation systems approach seems to offer a useful conceptual R&D framework but requires further elaboration and evaluation before it can be used operationally in decisions related to policies, institutions and practices. The SC would not agree with the Panel that an innovation systems approach is equated with holism, whereas everything else is reductionist. The SC disagrees with the Panel's suggestion that Centers should create a separate "Innovation Unit", which would wrongly signal that innovation is restricted to this unit rather than to the whole organization. The SC notes the report highlights that the issue of the lack of both documented impact and IPG attributes associated with natural resource management research remains a concern in most EPMRs. This deserves to be revisited by the SC.
- The Panel also highlighted important programmatic issues not dealt with in the EPMRs, such as the maintenance and use of databases and information in the CGIAR. The SC agrees that this issue has important IPG and system-level implications and deserves attention both at the Center level—to be monitored by EPMRs and the PMS—and at the level of the System's governance. The SC will follow up on this issue which is related to management of intellectual property.