

21st July 2010

Dear Ren,

We are pleased to provide the interim iISPC comments on the GRiSP proposal that were presented in the recent Fund Council meeting in Rome. The commentary text has been slightly augmented on the basis of key points brought up in the discussion which the ISPC would like to endorse. We emphasise that these comments are initial ones and the iISPC will engage external peer reviews in a thorough assessment following the criteria agreed. We plan to use, when applicable, the peer reviews that were commissioned by the Consortium Board.

From the interim assessment it is clear that the proposal has many strengths, several of which are enumerated in the attached commentary. We would draw the attention of the Funders and proponents to the following issues that in our view need to be addressed as a highest priority:

The proposal has been drawn up as a tripartite science partnership on rice merging research from the three CGIAR Centers that deal with rice (IRRI, Africa Rice and CIAT). Both research and management options need to be optimised for a single, coherent Mega Program. This new MP should have more focus on a narrower set of key challenges and problems that can be addressed through rice research and where the CGIAR has a clear comparative advantage. Prioritized research should include sustainability and eco-efficiency of rice systems. The requested levels of funding must be rationalized against prioritized activities and deliverables.

To qualify as a true MP proposal more clarity should be provided as to how the science will translate into developmental outcomes and impacts. Thus the proposal needs to present more specific impact pathways including clarity on the role of partners that will be required to turn research into widespread impacts. The proposal would benefit from a more dynamic scenario analysis regarding changes that are likely to affect the need for rice research in the future.

A stronger partnership analysis is needed, particularly regarding the relationships with NARS, and especially the BRIC countries and the effects of their increasingly powerful programs in rice, agricultural research and capacity building. A convincing proposal for a global rice program stretching over more than a decade cannot be developed without attention to these players.

We acknowledge that full coordination with other Mega Programs may not be feasible until the other programs are further developed. However, the overlapping, common and synergistic elements related to climate change can already be considered and this should be done in consultation with the forthcoming MP on climate change. It is also important to address the relationships between MP1 and GRiSP regarding systems that include rice.

We offer these observations in support of the improvement of this important program of research for the CGIAR, and for the benefit of MP development in the system as a whole.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rudy Rabbinge', is centered on the page.

Rudy Rabbinge
Chair

Independent Science and Partnership Council of the CGIAR

GRiSP, Global Rice Science Partnership
- the first fast tracked CGIAR Mega Program proposal

Initial comments from the interim Independent Science and Partnership Council
[16 July 2010]

General

The program for a global rice science partnership has its genesis in earlier arrangements and collaboration between Centres with the program now adapted to the new CGIAR requirement for MegaPrograms (MP). It reflects the desire of three CGIAR Centres (IRRI, Africa Rice and CIAT) to bring their rice research together, which was agreed to before the change in the CGIAR, and thus it was not intended to make their research a coherent part of the CGIAR's overall agenda. The title is thematic and does not really match the concept of a MP. It can thus only be considered a pilot MegaProgram in a general sense. However, rice is a highly important staple and enhancing food security in many developing countries through yield increases and more sustainable rice supplies for the poor would be considered central to the CGIAR portfolio. This is particularly the case now that more vulnerable and difficult environments and ecosystems are being considered.

These initial comments by the ISPC are provided in this light, awaiting a more comprehensive assessment. They are based on a very brief consultation with members of the Council and not the required peer review as the three days available for this interaction was much too short.

Overall, the GRiSP MP proposal is well written and clear. As a stand alone program it has several strong features. It is a comprehensive and thematically compelling proposal built on the work of existing Centres and their partners, with a maturing understanding of what it will take to collaborate in a global program of rice research. The program's future visibility as THE international rice R&D program is likely to be high.

In the CGIAR reform context, the GRiSP proposal's weaknesses are related to two particular aspects: a) the difficulty in demonstrating synergies and overlaps with other MPs (lacking an effective SRF) and, subsequently, the CGIAR's ability to build a coherent program to address specific developmental challenges, and b) the effects that it may have on development of the Fund.

Content of GRiSP proposal

Clarity of Program objectives

Strengths:

- The proposal addresses a high priority strategic research area and provides convincing evidence of the global importance of rice.

- It provides a global research program in rice that integrates research across regions and disciplines as well as along the value chain. The clear distinction of a product and product line approach by region is commendable.
- Comprehensive product line descriptions are helpful for understanding the scope and potential value of the six thematic areas.
- The proposal still uses yields rather than total factor productivity (TFP), but it does link to poverty and sustainability.
- There are good examples of enhanced research approach from the merger of the key partners of the MP: e.g. the research concepts for ecological resilience to pest and diseases and innovative technologies for ecological intensification of rice production systems under current and future climates in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Weaknesses:

- The proposal reflects a tripartite approach combining Center activities and plans. This approach affects the proposal's quality particularly regarding prioritization, focus, internal synergies and management.
- There are only a few examples of savings in terms of "business merger". For example there are 3 rainfed rice ecosystem product lines maintained for each of the regions. In all, the MP attempts to bring 32 "global and regional R&D product lines" to the market. And some of these product lines have multiple plant traits to add to the complexity. The "business-like results-based programme" would be better served by selecting fewer, high priority product lines.
- There are indications that the individual and separate activities (for instance in intellectual policy) will merge at some point. IP, in particular, is, however, not only a MP issue but a Consortium issue.
- There is a plan to seek bilateral funding to both program activities and non-program activities. The Fund is expected to contribute, but the assumed Fund portion is not prioritized. The overall benefit of a value-added approach is not clear - rather the proposal projects more as a new funding opportunity to conduct ongoing and new rice research.
- The targeting of the research on traits and systems of special importance to poor producers and consumers needs sharpening. This done, it is likely that LAC and China (especially if poverty is projected out 25 years) would receive much lower priority.
- The proposal is very much oriented towards productivity gains, and short on presenting alternative future scenarios that are likely to affect the future research needs. For example:
 - longer term threats to rice production (pest and pathogens, climate change, etc.)
 - large scale changes from current patterns of production (major river systems elsewhere than Asia, consequences of land grabbing etc.)
 - changing farming systems to enhance ecological efficiency and resilience
- CGIAR's comparative advantage could be questionable in some areas such as biofuels, value adding, and real time crop monitoring and forecasting. It should be made clear that these are, at best, secondary priorities.

Research outputs and plausibility of impact

Strengths:

- The proposal has a strong analytical base in terms of ex ante analysis and priority setting that feed into a results framework with specific quantified indicators.
- There are very specific targets and even bold claims of expected impact (production increases, reduction in rice price, # of malnourished reaching caloric sufficiency, reduction in rice area, etc.). Projecting such specific impact targets is commendable, as is providing details and justification for these claims in an appendix.
- The proposal includes specific components on scaling up adoption, on capacity building, and gender—all important to achieving wide impacts.
- For capacity building there is an innovative set of activities with key roles for Partners such as CIRAD and Leuven university in higher degree rice science training linked to field work in the regions.
- A component for continued strategic planning, priority setting and impact assessment is commendable.

Weaknesses:

- The impact pathways analyses are still quite generic and vague.
- The ex ante assessment is done only for South Asia. How the extrapolations for SE Asia, Africa and LAC were done is not stated
- The M&E program will need clearer product pathway analysis including anticipated dates of output availability and resource requirements identified per activity. It is not possible to assess appropriateness of amounts proposed with the available information.
- The expected outcomes from current projects will need to be better presented and subsequently evaluated.

Quality of research

Strengths:

- The research approaches are solid and appear to capture state of the art approaches in key areas such as genomics, system resilience to pests, yield gap analysis and adaptation to climate variation.
- The proposal incorporates the main recommendation about systems research from the last EPMRs of IRRI and Africa Rice regarding the need for genotype x environment interaction studies to define trait specific effects and to incorporate early multi-site testing in the breeding programs to capture favourable GXE effects.
- There are some new areas of research, such as N fixation in rice and research on labor saving technologies in Africa which is long over due. A research fund will provide grants for innovative proposals to blue sky research.

Quality of research and development partners and partnership management

Strengths:

- Although the MP could be stronger regarding ARI partnerships – for instance in genomics, it includes two major ARI partners with significant rice research assets.

Weaknesses:

- More clarity is needed on specific roles of specific partners (the proposal is too generic and often sites the 450 odd rice research partners). Only 18% of budget allocated to partners, which appears small. “Partners” are really “clients” in many cases.
- The proposal is lacking in its consideration of the strong NARS (BRICS), particularly China (with substantial programs in rice, its own direction in hybrid rice - and probably massive potential for technological capacity building in Africa) and Brazil. These countries are lumped together with other NARS. In LAC, CIAT and FLAR will be building/rebuilding activities from a very small current base compared with the Brazilian national system. China and Brazil should be thoroughly considered in their two regional settings as well as global policy, global rice gateways, capacity building etc.
- Roles of and aspirations for the private sector are not addressed. The role for the private sector in hybrids appears static; no clear analysis of private sector expertise in innovation and business know-how for added value of rice products is presented.
- Roles of the CGIAR Centers in the innovation pathway are not explicit.
- In planning much of the extension of technologies through existing networks (INGER, CLAR etc) there should be a plan to enhance their performance and perhaps staffing.

Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management

The new and added management structures reinforce the observation about compilation of all existing activities of the 3 Centers. It is not designed to streamline decision-making at the CGIAR system level. Thus the management structure of this MP seems already unwieldy.

Efficiency of governance

The governance is logical (but leads to high real overheads). It will be important to exert the authority of the program management and oversight groups in relation to the host/lead centre.

GRiSP in the context of the SRF and regarding other MPs

The GRiSP proposal mentions but could not detail links with other MPs in the absence of the SRF [or other MPs] as a guiding document. The main risk would be loss of potential synergies among MPs or weakening of other future MPs through this program's encroachment into their core business. The program covers some "product lines" that will also be the domain of other MPs. It appears that interactions with other MPs will be at additional cost.

There are some examples of lost opportunities for synergies at the CGIAR system level:

- Work on genomics and bioinformatics is further compartmentalized by crop. The GRiSP proposal appropriates rice-specific components of the Generation CP. Although the proposal includes an articulation of a comparative genomics and breeding platform for the system (following from GenCP?), this is then lacking from the SRF where it should be. Subsequently the opportunity for increased synergy across commodities could be lost.
- One of the hallmarks of the SRF is to think in terms of systems, but this MP has a strong commodity lens. For example, in the upland systems in Africa and Asia rice is only one part of the system and focusing on rice will be inadequate for solving major problems in those systems. The greater opportunity is to focus on key rice-based ecosystems.
- In general, the rice-based systems of South Asia should be at the core of MP1 on systems research, as they concern hundreds of millions of poor people. At the portfolio level, the rice-wheat systems must be appropriately addressed, for instance.
- Germplasm conservation could be fragmented; in this proposal it is considered Center-specific and the costs additional to the already large GRiSP budget.
- There are other areas of potential overlap, such as climate change issues, policy areas, labour productivity enhancement and post harvest issues in Africa, etc. which cannot currently be evaluated. As the program matures higher levels of programmatic integration would be expected, with an increased focus around fewer research challenges.

The proposal seems to raise the specter of Centers seeking ways of getting their portfolios fully funded, with or without the Fund. That could potentially erode the key concepts of the reform. The debate between the GRiSP proponents and the Consortium Board is indicative of such a collision. Strong Centers, including those in GRiSP, may not be expected to shed parts of their portfolio to accommodate others, but the outcomes from this kind of a race could be quite negative for the reform. The Consortium Board has the responsibility to establish the balance. Considering a portfolio of MPs, it will be important to have plans adjusted to different levels of realizable funding. There is a need to balance steady increases to current Center budgets with potential savings from streamlining.

Additional clarifications arising from Fund Council discussion [16/07/2010]

1. Noting the potential conflict in views about funding envelopes for GRiSP, the ISPC confirms that the authority for determining the upper funding limit from the CGIAR Fund to be presented in proposals should rest with the Consortium Board.
2. Attention should be paid to distinguishing or unifying “workplan” years and “budget” years in the proposal as currently both are used.
3. Logframes which introduce timelines for deliverables are required (as Annexes).
4. The ISPC strongly supports the separation of genebank maintenance costs from the program encompassing research on genetic resources. This is a system issue, not unique to the rice Centres, and should be treated as such. The ISPC has offered to augment the Consortium Board commissioned studies of genebank costs and “research gaps” as it believes a comprehensive assessment of genebanks, research on agro-biodiversity and the genetic resources policy (needs and instruments of the system) should be tackled together.
5. The ISPC urges a more comprehensive description of the future engagement with the BRICS and the effects that the growth of the rice programs of the strong NARS will have for the future of the GRiSP and possibilities for devolution of effort.
6. Whilst the proposal generates some excitement and expectation of gains through genetic and genomic approaches, more could be said of the advances in rice systems (and the breadth of benefits for environmental sustainability, including climate change mitigation, and human welfare) expected from augmenting research on eco-efficiencies, water and soil nutrition.
7. However, in some cases (page 10) the proposal does make evident the likely achievements from the promise of new science. This is to be commended and such approaches encouraged in future MP development.
8. Related to the above, is the opportunity in newly emerging commodity systems (like rice in Africa) to enhance “ecological literacy” and so leapfrog traditional stages in systems development and purely serendipitous increase in yields.
9. Whilst the proposal should be more keenly aware of the environmental and other consequences of targeting an increase in yield of 100 million tonnes of rice, proper management of intensive production systems may be a means to mitigate the production of GHGs, excess soil nitrogen etc. rather than automatically assuming that a rice program can only work towards adaptation in the face of climate change.
10. Similarly the consequences of the research succeeding to enhance the global rice harvest should be projected in terms of the interplay of production and livelihoods, and translated into development scenarios.

11. The ISPC confirms the role that policy must play in the global enhancement of rice. Further, acting in its role as an honest broker, the CGIAR's strong suit is to make scientific knowledge internationally available and so set out the evidence base which underpins good policy formulation.