

The *Stripe Review of Social Sciences in the CGIAR* was commissioned by the Science Council. The objectives were to provide a comprehensive assessment of the CGIAR's social science research agenda: the relevance of research, the capacity and incentives for conducting high-quality research that can contribute to CGIAR goals, and the opportunities for improving the organization of social science research and the partnerships for conducting it. This brief presents the main features of the stripe review and summarizes the panel's findings and recommendations.

The review was conducted by a panel of eminent social scientists: Professors Christopher B. Barrett (Chair), Arun Agrawal, Oliver T. Coomes and Jean-Philippe Platteau.

Although the panel identified pockets of excellence in CGIAR social science, it also identified shortcomings in social science competence, quality of research methods and products, and research organization and partnerships. It recommended fundamental reforms for addressing these shortcomings and restoring incentives to conduct high-quality impact-oriented social science research. Reforms include the reorganization and refocusing of social science research to restore critical mass, create a coherent research effort and strengthen partnerships and mentoring.

The panel concludes that the CGIAR needs high-quality social science to achieve impacts on poverty, food insecurity and environmental degradation. It states that there are excellent opportunities to build stronger and more relevant social science components into the CGIAR programs – the time is ripe for change in CGIAR social science.

Stripe Review of Social Sciences in the CGIAR

Social science in the centers supported by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) has lost much of its coherence and quality because of increasing reliance on short-term restricted project funding and the associated pressure to generate on-the-ground development impacts.

This is one of the main conclusions of the *Stripe Review of Social Sciences in the CGIAR*, a study commissioned by the Science Council and summarized in this brief¹.

The review panel formed its diagnosis around what is termed the 'new business model'. This model is characterized by a shift from largely unrestricted core funding to restricted funding, most of which comes through small, short-duration development-oriented grants, and by an almost unlimited expansion of social scientists' agenda due to a lack of vision as to how CGIAR social science research can best contribute to agricultural development. Despite the shift towards more downstream, shorter term activities, centers have sought to maintain a large cadre of international staff holding Ph.Ds. This model has led to a loss of focus and fragmentation in social science work, an erosion of the quality and effectiveness of social science research, a fall in staff morale, and difficulties in recruiting and retaining high-quality staff.

There remain pockets of excellence in CGIAR social science, typically characterized by substantive interdisciplinary collaboration (e.g. between economists and nutritionists or between biophysical scientists and social scientists), sufficient seniority among the researchers, clearly defined long-term projects with assured funding, and long-term partnerships with both advanced research institutes and national partners. This research has yielded publications of high quality that have directly influenced high-impact development interventions and policies while also feeding into the broader global dialogue on agricultural development.

The review

The impetus for the Stripe Review arose from concerns repeatedly expressed in many external center reviews that social science capacity in the centers was deteriorating. The study, which covered CGIAR centers and challenge programs, comprised the following activities:

- Collecting comprehensive data on social science activities and results
- Developing a normative framework for 'optimal' social science roles in the CGIAR, against which the current state could be assessed
- Conducting an e-consultation with CGIAR social scientists to prioritize issues and define hypotheses
- Conducting an in-depth analysis of publications, citations and examples of social science partnerships and impact
- Reviewing a sample of projects with social science content
- Interviewing staff and partners at nine center headquarters or regional offices
- Surveying staff in advanced research and national partner institutions, and
- Soliciting feedback on the draft report from centers and external social science experts.

This exhaustive effort provides the first comprehensive look at CGIAR social science in decades and offers an important window on CGIAR research more broadly².

The findings

The review found that one-quarter of all internationally recruited research staff working in the CGIAR are engaged in social science activities (310 out of 1163 in 2008). The majority of these, 60%, are trained as economists (agricultural or other), followed by geographers (7%) and anthropologists (6%). Lack of critical mass among disciplines other than economics is a serious issue. Surprisingly, 8% of staff working on social science issues do not have an advanced degree in any social science discipline. The number of social scientists has increased by about 33% in the past five years, ten times more than the 3.3% estimated increase in non-social scientists. Most of the staff increase has been due to growth in restricted project funding. In 2007 only 38% of social science staff expenditures were covered by core

funding and it is obvious that social scientists spend a significant proportion of their time in search of further funding. Despite the general trend of increasing social science staff, the panel observed difficulties in recruitment and retention of top social scientists. Among the reasons, the panel detected problems in offering social scientists a clear research career path and entry-level salaries that are competitive in the market.

Drawing evidence from publications, citations and project data and from reading over 200 publications selected by the centers as their best, the panel concluded that research quality is highly variable. Problems were identified in research design and methods, in collection, management and use of data, and in publication quality. Rigorous research design and high-quality outputs were also identified, but only in a minority of the materials reviewed. Interdisciplinary research and research focusing either on markets or on agricultural productivity and technologies featured most often in the research judged to be of high quality. Concerned by the low quality of much of the research reviewed, the panel concluded that while tangible development impact from high-quality research is uncertain, it is virtually certain that no major sustained impacts result from low-quality research.

The study found the CGIAR centers and programs to be very heterogeneous regarding the critical mass of social scientists they had available in terms of location, time spent on substantive interaction and the quality and coherence of their efforts. The CGIAR system as whole was diagnosed as 'doing less with more', meaning that the conditions under which its increased cadre of social scientists are obliged to work do not induce high-quality and high-impact activities but have instead increased short-term, fragmented activities akin to those undertaken by consulting firms. The panel observed that, due to the kinds of project new staff are recruited to work on, there is a tendency among these staff to emphasize the development part of the CGIAR's mission and to ignore its research mandate and its role in generating international public goods, thereby reinforcing the system's mission drift. The panel observed a common misconception among social science researchers and their managers that the CGIAR's direct involvement in development activities means enhanced relevance.

Interviews within and outside the CGIAR confirmed that the CGIAR has several features that give its social scientists clear comparative advantage in comparison with other organizations involved in social science research relevant for agriculture. The most important attributes are the ability to organize research around problems rather than disciplines – especially the ease of conducting inter-disciplinary research combining the biophysical and social sciences – and the ability to work at an international scale and to sustain efforts over time. Other elements of comparative advantage include the centers' physical infrastructure and long-term presence in developing countries, and their cadres of well trained, internationally recruited staff. These attributes give CGIAR social science a strong comparative advantage in generating international public goods for productivity growth, poverty reduction and sustainable natural resources management through three types of research: (i) multidisciplinary research on technological innovation; (ii) research on institutional innovations; (iii) research for directly informing agricultural and rural development policy. The panel judged the first area to be the single most important one for the purpose of generating significant impacts.

The review panel saw a very important role for social scientists in engaging in *ex ante* impact assessment to inform research prioritization and to design clear impact pathways. Measuring *ex post* impact is also an important function and the panel emphasized the value of both providing donors with credible information on the impact of research and linking *ex post* findings with *ex ante* predictions in order to learn from experience and improve future research prioritization and design.

However, the panel detected an increase in reporting short-term results from small projects in response to the pressure from donors to demonstrate development impact – a practice that distracts CGIAR staff from their mission and threatens to undersell the value of the system's research. These studies the panel found to be highly time consuming and, on average, of low quality. The panel was concerned that the nature of impact is misunderstood by many CGIAR stakeholders. Major breakthroughs in research occur with only limited predictability and their effects are felt over long periods.

Recommendations

The panel's report contains four broad recommendations:

- Management reform is needed to address the key issues of social science competence, comparative advantage and relevance for the mission, and to restore incentives and unrestricted funding for impact.
- Social science research needs to be re-organized and re-focused to improve the critical mass of social science units and the coherence of their work, to restore long-term effective partnerships, especially with advanced research institutions, and to strengthen research mentoring by senior social scientists. The panel recommends organizing long-term, multi-locational data collection using a mix of methods at sentinel sites for regional systems analysis in platforms that bring together social and natural scientists. Another platform is recommended for organizing CGIAR social science work along the continuum from *ex ante* analysis for priority setting, through methodology development at the interface of research and its use, to *ex post* impact assessment.
- Human resource management practices in relation to social scientists need to be updated to restore the CGIAR's attractiveness as a career option for highly skilled social scientists.
- The centers need to foster a culture of rigorous social science research that includes debate among peers, feedback on performance, more purposeful dissemination of results and proper consideration of ethical issues in project planning and review.

There are now excellent opportunities for building stronger and more relevant social science components into the CGIAR. Donors and governments have once again recognized the importance of agriculture and of agricultural research for development. They are expressing renewed interest in applied research in the social sciences as a contributor to development impact. Finally, the CGIAR is going through a reform process aimed at changing its governance and funding, as well as its program planning and implementation, in order to increase the system's relevance, efficiency and effectiveness.

Conclusion

The review concluded that CGIAR can take full advantage of these opportunities, but to do so it needs to assess and appreciate its comparative advantage in the social sciences and to organize itself to enhance its performance in this area.

- 1 The full version of the study on which this brief is based is: *Stripe Review of Social Sciences in the CGIAR*. Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, CGIAR Science Council and Science Council Secretariat: Rome, Italy. The study is available at: <http://www.sciencecouncil.cgiar.org/documents/en/>
- 2 The Science Council appreciates the high quality of the diagnosis and supports most of the recommendations. The Science Council's commentary on the findings is attached to the full report.

