

30 December 2008

**Center Commissioned External Review of the  
Environment and Production Technology Division (EPTD)**

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**Background and Activities**

The CCER took place at IFPRI Headquarters in Washington DC from October 27 to 31, 2008. It was preceded by the reading of various documents provided to us by IFPRI, visits of the IFPRI website and anecdotal conversations with various people, knowledgeable about the work of the Division whom we happened to meet or talk to in the weeks preceding our visit to Washington. In addition, our assessment was based on presentations made to us by the Division Director and Division staff, group discussion with staff working on the three main themes of the Division's agenda, further readings and telephone interviews with a small number of partners and donors. (See Appendix 1: Agenda.) Obviously, the sample of persons contacted was very small and should not be viewed as representative in any way. All of this limits the base of information for our assessment, which remains somewhat subjective as a result. But we should stress that we found a great degree of convergence among our various sources of information and that we easily agreed between the two of us on the main messages to convey in this report. We should also note that, in finalizing this report, we have taken into account the comments received during the presentation of our results to the Division staff, as well as the subsequent written comment from the Division Director. These have helped clarify our initial observations on some issues, especially those relating to capacity building and partnerships. Our Terms of Reference (see Appendix 2) were very broad. We focused mainly on the relevance and the quality of the Division's work, looking at past activities and future plans. Our main desire is that our assessment will help the Division in the elaboration of its strategy for the future.

**Overall Assessment**

The general impression is very favorable, beginning with the "atmosphere" throughout our visit. Everybody we met was friendly, open to discussion, attentive to what we had to say and also to all our needs and requests. We view this as a useful indicator of a well-functioning institution. Another indicator was the quality and consistency of the presentations made to us on our first day in Washington, demonstrating seriousness and a high level of professionalism. This very positive impression extends to the performance of the Division. The work they do is highly relevant and of generally high quality. In addition, they have been very productive and the list of the partners they are collaborating with is impressive. The rest of this report is devoted to questions and concerns which can however be raised.

## Quality of Research

Assessing the quality of the research done by the Division is difficult. Time did not permit us to review but a minute fraction of the Division's publications. One indicator is of course the number of papers published after peer reviews, particularly articles in reputed peer-reviewed professional journals. According to data provided by the Division's Director, we note with pleasure that the number of peer-reviewed journal articles per Senior Research Staff has risen to 2.36 for the 2005-October 2008 period from 1.7 for the 1998-2004, mentioned in the most recent EPMR of the Institute, which noted in addition that the Division "had the highest publication record in the Institute."

Questions have been raised however regarding the quality of the journals involved? Are they the most reputed professional journals? At the same time, publishing articles in regional publications and participating in editorial boards of such journals are means to strengthen the capacity of the professions in developing countries and also an efficient way to reach a target audience of importance to IFPRI's mandate. It remains however that outside academic colleagues we talked to consider that Division staff do not publish enough in the "best journals", contributing to the economic development literature beyond the agricultural economics profession. Whatever one may think of the validity of this criticism, which does not take into account the fact that disciplines other than economics are also involved in the Division's research, such an opinion in and of itself must be born in mind since peer review is a necessary instrument of quality control in any research institution.

Other indicators of quality must also be considered. How well are research questions elaborated and formulated? On this point, we were generally satisfied that Division staff were doing well even though, as discussed further below, we felt that the presentation by individual and small teams of their research strategies could have been better. In addition, assessing the formulation of the researchable questions involves also a judgment on their relevance, as distinct from quality. And this is also discussed below. Another determinant of research quality is the use of appropriate approaches, methods and data. On this point, we were satisfied that the Division did not fall in a common trap: being unduly restricted to one's favorite approach or pet model. Admittedly, the IMPACT model has figured prominently for many years among the tools used by the Division for its work on Outlooks and Global Changes. This seems justified by the high costs implied by the construction and maintenance of such a large model and also, of course, by the usefulness of the model. But there are drawbacks, in terms of transparency and transferability, making peer review of the model itself difficult. Current plans to build an integrated modeling system, which seem also justified, will have the same drawbacks. We recommend that the Division consider systematic review by outsiders of its modeling efforts and comparisons with other modeling approaches.

## **Relevance of Activities**

Assessing the relevance of the Division’s activities to the Institute’s mission (“to provide policy solutions that reduce poverty and end hunger and malnutrition”) is also quite difficult since, broadly, it is not always clear what the policy questions are and what measurable indicators of “outputs” are expected from these activities in relation to the questions. In part, this is also related to the multiplicity of stakeholders that the Institute is responding to (donors, research community, policymakers, local administrators and trainers, etc.). However, our reading, albeit cursory, of the various internal reports and publications, as well as our discussion with select colleagues outside of the Institute, do convince us that the Division’s activities jibe well with the Institute’s mission and strategy.

Consistent with the Institute’s mission, the Division conducts policy research addressing global, national, and local issues that impinge on poverty, hunger, and malnutrition in developing countries. Its three layers of research—global, national, and local—are understood to reinforce each other. For example, research on local communities is expected to sharpen understanding of the probable ground-level responses, especially of the poor, to national and global shocks and policy changes. Such understanding allows a finer formulation of institutional and policy reforms aimed at protecting the poor from any adverse impacts of the shocks on policy changes.

The challenge for the Division is to find the appropriate mix between global and national/local research activities in such a way that, given its resource and staff time constraints, the contribution of the Division’s activities to the Institute’s mandate is maximized. This would mean that it has to constantly examine carefully (i) where its dynamic comparative advantage lies and (ii) what appropriate modalities of engagement it needs to have with its institutional partners, both global/regional and local. The latter is elaborated below. On the former, we note that the Institute’s comparative access to national, regional, and global information and resources, including pool of experts, gives the Division a natural niche to taking the lead in carrying out globally and regionally oriented research activities (production of international or global public goods). On this, we note that the IMPACT model and related initiatives offer much potential as an anchor for much of the Division’s activities.

## **Modalities of Engagement with Partners and Collaborators**

Broadly, the Division has been quite successful in engaging partners and collaborators to achieve its mandate. Dwindling finances for core projects have made it necessary for the Division to increasingly source project funding from developed-country governments, philanthropic foundations, and other multilateral agencies. Evidently, its success in being able to repeatedly secure or renew projects from the same partners (e.g., World Bank, BMG Foundation) is a strong indication of staff credibility, professionalism, and competence.

On the other hand, our impression of the Division’s collaboration with developing country-partners is rather mixed. Our interviews with them, albeit limited and by no means representing the depth and breadth of the Division’s engagement with its partners, suggest to us that there are opportunities for developing a strategic collaboration with partner institutions in these countries in a way that it contributes systematically to long-term research capacity

strengthening. For instance, in developing countries where there is reasonably sufficient research capacity (for example, in many Asian countries), opportunities exist for a decentralized system of research collaboration, in which local researchers may take the lead in implementing local research. Obviously, given the heterogeneity of the countries in terms of research capacity development, a one-size-fits-all approach does not apply. The challenge for the Division is to be pro-active in identifying mechanisms for capacity strengthening even as its activities are increasingly constrained by project funding. For example, in a relatively small country, it may be advantageous to focus collaborative efforts on a key research institution, possibly to one engaged in local capacity building, to maximize the impact of the collaboration on national research capacity. To be sure, in its research engagements with a number of developing countries, the Division has exerted considerable efforts toward this direction. It has, for example, reportedly taken this approach in Uganda (Makerere University and NARO in multiple projects each over many years), Ethiopia (Environmental Economics Policy Forum in Ethiopia), and Nigeria (Abeokuta University and University of Ibadan). It has also established long-lasting collaborative arrangements with institutions in Indonesia (CASER, now called ICASEPS, a government agricultural socio-economic research institute) and India (Tamil Nadu Agricultural University). Nonetheless, our view is that there is ample room for strategically organizing these collaborations in such a way that the local partners are empowered to ultimately lead local research and development.

### **Internal Programming Processes**

Here we attempt to assess the processes within the Institute and the Division which lead to the choice of activities (“priority setting”, “clarity of the objectives”, “lines of logic for arriving at the research agenda”, “criteria for making strategic choices”, according to the terminology used in our TORs).

The answers to the questions we posed on these processes stressed their interactive and iterative nature. They convinced us that indeed many stakeholders must be involved. Funders of projects have values and criteria which obviously cannot be ignored by those who submit proposals; but Division staff must also strive to respond to the needs of policy makers in developing countries, particularly in order to enhance the elaboration and implementation of policies ‘serving poor people’, as stated in IFPRI’s Strategy of June 2007. In addition, since IFPRI is first and foremost a research institution, with outreach activities based on that research, proper attention must also be given to the conditions necessary for the conduct of good research (e.g. necessary time lag between the formulation of questions and the dissemination of results, sufficient attention given to the formulation of the researchable questions, critical evaluation of available data, collection of appropriate new data, etc.). This multiplicity of stakeholders and of concerns is naturally the cause of tensions, which cannot be avoided but must be managed. Some of these tensions and the need to strike appropriate balances were already discussed above in the paragraphs assessing the relevance of the work done by the Division and the quality of the partnerships in which the Division is involved. We did not detect major systematic flaws in the management of these unavoidable tensions. We however identified one potential improvement. In several instances, we felt that individual staff or research teams did not demonstrate a clear vision of their research strategy. This weakness is somewhat surprising given the quality of the strategic reflection at the overall Institute level, as evidenced in the Strategy document quoted

above and which we used extensively. Similarly, the presentation of the Division made to us by its Director, notably the stress it put on the “implications of complexity”, reflected that careful thought had been given to strategic concerns. It may be that our perception reflects more a problem of presentation than of substance. In either case, we recommend that efforts be made to remedy this perceived weakness.

### **Looking Forward, Issues to be Addressed**

The time pressures, which Division staff are subjected to, are a cause of concern. According to interviews with both Division staff and outsiders, these pressures result from the reduction of the share of unrestricted funding in the overall financing of the Institute but also from the success of the Division in mobilizing project funding, reflecting the high demand for their products and services. As a result, Division staff work long hours, seem enthusiastic about what they do, and are productive. All of this is obviously good. The concern stems from an apparent lack of quality time for careful reflection, for writing papers passing muster for publication in demanding professional journals and, more generally, for professional growth. We note that this impression seems to be largely shared inside the Division and by the outsiders we talked to. We fully understand that this issue is not restricted to the EPT Division; it is an Institute-wide issue. In addition, it is difficult to tackle it, given the nature of the current funding structure, which is itself difficult to change. We recommend that attention be given to it and ways be found to mitigate the damaging impact this situation may have on the sustainability of the Division’s performance. Examples of mitigating measures to be explored include careful use of visiting scientists, devolution of tasks to partners as discussed above, changes in time budget procedures to earmark, and thus protect, quality time free of project obligations, for reflection and professional growth, etc.

Little has been said so far of the internal organization of the Division around themes and sub-themes. We understood that these have facilitated collaboration and coordination across Divisions within the Institute and contributed to better align, and in a more transparent fashion than in the past, the work of the Institute with CGIAR priorities. One drawback is that, when assessing the work of the Division as we have been asked to do, the logic and coherence of the overall organization at that level is not clear. One does not see any comprehensive and common analytical framework encompassing all the activities of Division staff. This shortcoming may not be very serious; it does not seem to have reduced the productivity of the various components of the Division. But it leads to the question: are there potential synergies across themes and teams which are not exploited? We did not identify any obvious ones. On the contrary, in the case of gender issues, the current organization seems to have permitted at the same time the mainstreaming of these issues, particularly in the work on natural resource management, and the continuing emphasis and visibility of a specific program on gender issues.

We are more concerned about the work on Science and Technology. The two components which were presented, “Genetic Resources for the Poor’ and the ‘Program for Biosafety Systems” seem interesting and productive but the relationships among them are not obvious and these two components do not cover the whole range of Science and Technology policy issues to be analyzed. Many of these issues are taken up in the ISNAR Division, which was not in our

remit. We wonder however whether or not such a division of labor between EPTD and ISNAR can be productive in the long run.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Overall, the Division's performance has been quite impressive, given the constraints on mode of project funding and operations, as well as its external environment. However, it has to constantly examine its comparative advantage and modalities of engagement with donors, partners, and stakeholders, with the end in view of further improving the quality and relevance of its work, thereby maximizing its contributions to the Institute's mission.

*Appendix 1*

**Agenda**  
**Friday, October 24 – Saturday, November 1, 2008**

Date/Time	Activity	Staff
<i>October 24</i>	Arrival of reviewers	
<i>October 25-26</i>	Reading of documents	
<i>October 27</i>		
9:30 am	Meeting with Director General, DGO	<i>Joachim von Braun and Teunis van Rheenen</i>
10:00-10:30 am	Meeting with Mark Rosegrant	<i>Mark and Teunis</i>
10:30-10:45 am	Coffee break	
10:45 am –12:30 pm	Division presentation <i>Conference Room 4A&amp;B</i>	
10:45-11:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Overview and Strategic Framework <i>Focus - Efficient and Fair Functioning of Global and National Food and Agriculture Systems</i></li> </ul>	<i>Mark</i>
11:15-11:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theme 1. Outlooks and Global Change Research Program               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Global Food and Natural Resources: Strategies and Policies for Adapting to Global Change                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bioenergy</li> <li>- HarvestChoice</li> </ul> </li> </ol> </li> </ul>	<i>Jerry Nelson</i>
11:30-11:45		<i>Siwa Msangi</i>
11:45-12:00 noon		<i>Stanley Wood</i>
12:00-12:15 pm	Discussion	
12:15-1:30	Lunch	
1:30-1:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theme 3: Natural Resources Policies</li> </ul>	<i>John Pender/Claudia Ringler Claudia</i>
1:45-2:00	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Water Resource Allocation: Productivity and Environmental Impacts</li> </ol>	
2:00-2:15	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Land Resource Management for Poverty Reduction</li> </ol>	<i>John</i>
2:15-2:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CGIAR System-wide Program on Collective Action and Property Rights</li> </ul>	<i>Ruth Meinzen-Dick</i>
2:30-2:45	Discussion	
2:45-3:00	<i>Focus - Enhancing Pro-poor Food and Agriculture System Innovations</i>	<i>Jose Falck-Zepeda</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Theme 9: Science and Technology</li> </ul>	

<b>Date/Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Staff</b>
3:00-3:15	1. Genetic Resource Policies for the Poor	<i>Guillaume Gruere</i>
3:15-3:30	2. Program for Biosafety Systems	<i>Jose</i>
3:30-3:45	Discussion	
3:45-4:00	New Global and Regional Program (GRP) under Theme 3	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthening Women's Control of Assets for Better Development Outcomes</li> </ul>	<i>Ruth</i>
4:00-4:15	Discussion	
4:15-5:15	Reception	
5:15 onwards	Reading of documents	
<b>October 28</b>	Discussion with Theme members, <i>Conference Room 4A</i>	
9:30 am	Theme 1	<i>Theme 1 members</i>
10:30	Theme 3 and CAPRI	<i>Theme 3 and CAPRI members</i>
11:30	Theme 9 members	<i>Theme 9.3 members</i>
Afternoon	Reading of documents	
<b>October 29</b>	Conference calls with Donors and Collaborators	
9:00 am	Lindiwe Sibanda, Chief Executive Officer, Food, Agriculture and Natural Resources Policy Analysis Network (FANRPAN), SOUTH AFRICA	
9:30	Rashid Hassan, Director, Centre for Environmental Economics and Policy in Africa (CEEPA), SOUTH AFRICA	
10:00	Simeon Ehui, Sector Leader, Sustainable Development, World Bank, Abuja, NIGERIA	
11:30	Prabhu Pingali, Deputy Director and Head of Agricultural Policy and Statistics, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Washington, USA	
<b>1:00 pm</b>	<b>Mid-term meeting with Joachim</b>	
3:00	James Roumasset, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Hawaii	
3:30	Philip Pandey, Professor, University of Minnesota, USA	
<b>October 30</b>	Report writing	
12:00 noon	Lunch with Mark Rosegrant	
<b>October 31</b>		
Morning	Report writing	
11:00 am	Meeting with Shenggen Fan, Division Director, Development Strategy and Governance	

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<b>Date/Time</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Staff</b>
1:30 pm	Discussion of findings with Joachim, Mark, and Teunis	
3:00-4:30	Meeting with EPTD staff Presentation of findings to EPTD staff <i>Conference Room 4B</i>	
<i>November 1</i>	Departure of reviewers	

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*Appendix 2***Statement of Work****Background**

Research in the Environment and Production Technology Division (EPTD) focuses on meeting food production needs in developing countries in ways that are beneficial to the poor and do not degrade the natural resource base. This involves identifying the most appropriate technological and institutional changes and policies for sustainable and equitable agricultural production. Research attempts to identify appropriate policies for less-favored rainfed areas, including forest margins, hillsides, and semi-arid lands, and water management policies for high-potential irrigated areas. The division's research mandate also includes work on agricultural research and extension and on property rights and collective action.

**Objectives and Scope**

The External Program and Management Review (EPMR) of IFPRI, which was completed with presentations and commentaries at the CGIAR Annual General Meeting (AGM), December 2005, recommended that IFPRI do a Center Commissioned External Review of one or two research divisions each year and this proposal was endorsed by the board.

The Panel of two senior consultants will review EPTD's research and capacity strengthening activities to:

- Assess the relevance and quality of the activities and the supporting evidence for that assessment;
- Evaluate the planning and priority setting processes of the programs;
- Assess whether the activities in the Division were shaped and guided by clear objectives;
- Assess whether the rationale and lines of logic for arriving at the research agenda are transparent, systematic and rigorous;
- Assess the transparency of the criteria used for making strategic choices and identifying best bet opportunities and their consistency with those employed by the CGIAR in developing its own priorities and strategies, i.e. the contribution to CGIAR goals, the production of international public goods, probabilities of success and cost effectiveness, and alternative sources of supply and comparative advantages;
- Assess the outcomes and impacts, cost-effectiveness and relevance to IFPRI goals; and
- Assess the nature and effectiveness of the Division's partnerships through review of joint products.

## **Management of EPT Division**

The panel will assess the management of the division. This will include reviewing the quality of inputs including staff and infrastructures, and processes that were put in place to assure quality.

## **Forward looking**

The Panel is asked to give a strategic evaluation that is forward looking. Recommendations are solicited from the panel that will make EPTD's activities more effective in the future.

## **Process**

- This review shall commence on October 24, 2008 and include 7 days of intensive assessment of the division.
- A package of EPTD documents will be prepared for the panel, which will include a synthesis document prepared by the Division Director regarding activities of the division.
- The following time allocation is foreseen:
  - 2 days to read the relevant documents.
  - 3 days for meetings with staff
  - 1 day to prepare draft report and recommendations.
  - 1 day presentation of report and recommendations.
  - 4 days for travel and finalizing the report

## **Documents for Review**

To undertake this review the Panel will assess IFPRI's strategy document, existing reviews, Medium-Term Plan, Internal Program Review (IPR) documents, and the full spectrum of EPTD's publication products. The Panel will have access to all relevant documents on management, proposals, and outputs of the EPT division.