

AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

World Bank Bailout Seeks Changes in Global Network

For 23 years, scientists at a unique consortium of 18 agricultural research centers spread around the world have tried to increase Earth's ability to feed its ever-growing population. Just last month, for instance, scientists at one center announced new breeds of drought-resistant corn that could boost crop yields by 30% in some developing countries. But while the consortium, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), has been leading the search for hardier strains of food crops, better livestock breeding techniques, and more efficient irrigation systems that can be used without depleting finite resources, it has been losing the battle to conserve another finite but precious resource—money. An annual gap of \$55 million has opened up between the group's research agenda and its ability to pay for those activities, as government sponsors shift limited funds from agriculture to population control and environmental concerns. More than 100 scientists have either left for greener pastures or been cut loose in the past 2 years, and a variety of programs have been curtailed.

But help is on the way. Last month the World Bank, one of CGIAR's three major international sponsors, agreed to spend \$100 million over 2 years to fully fund its \$270-million-a-year research plan. The Bank's contribution includes a \$20-million donation spread over 2 years that requires CGIAR to raise twice that amount from other sources. However, some critics of the deal argue that the Bank has another, less altruistic, goal in mind: They see the Bank's increased role in CGIAR as a way to gain control of samples of germ plasm used to breed better crops.

No matter what the take on the current situation, most everyone agrees that CGIAR has had an illustrious history. "CGIAR has been one of the great success stories in international development over the last 20 years," says Michel Petit, director of a new agriculture unit at the World Bank. The investment in CGIAR, says Petit, "is intended to preserve a system that works."

In stepping in, the World Bank was particularly concerned about a recent decline in the number of joint projects being carried out with National Agricultural Research Centers (NARC) in developing countries. Petit says the Bank wants to strengthen these centers, which are intended to help developing countries solve agricultural problems on their own. Despite their popularity, the

NARC programs have been underfunded because donors usually earmark funds for a specific project rather than for the type of support—training, equipment, and the like—needed by the centers.

The new funding scheme requires CGIAR to reassess its priorities and streamline its decision making through a new steering committee chaired by a World Bank official. When money was plentiful, explains CGIAR's executive secretary, Alexander von der Osten, donors and centers



Bean counters. CGIAR's gene bank in Cali, Colombia (*inset*) reflects the importance of beans as a food source.

jointly decided what projects to fund. But in an era of shrinking budgets, he says, CGIAR's loose management structure "moves too slowly to address funding shortfalls." The steering committee, says Petit, "will lead to less autonomy for the individual donors and centers, but we believe that if people accept a little discipline, the whole will be greater than the sum of the parts."

Most CGIAR directors welcome the World Bank's intervention. "It's a tremendous relief," says Gustavo Nores, director-general of the Centro Internacional de Agricultura Tropical in Cali, Colombia, one of the CGIAR centers. In the past 2 years CGIAR has seen funding from its main backers—industrialized nations such as Canada, Japan, the United States, and international foundations—plummet by 15%, with the U.S. share falling by 26%—\$10 million—in 1994 alone. The World Bank money "will help keep research activities going at full blast," says Curtis Farrar, director of administration and finance at the International Food Policy Research Institute, a CGIAR center based in Washington, D.C.

But not everybody is pleased with the bailout. Last month, at a meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, to discuss implementing the 1992 treaty on biodiversity, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and ministers of developing nations asserted that the World Bank intends to profit from CGIAR's collection of 500,000 samples, or accessions, of plant germ plasm used to breed better crops.

The biodiversity treaty regards plant germ plasm as the property of the country of origin; treaty signatories are now devising a means to pay royalties to developing countries for use of germ plasm, says Dick Van Sloeten, deputy director of the International Board for Plant Genetic Resources, a CGIAR center based in Rome. Pending further review by the signatories, however, CGIAR's germ-plasm banks—which account for about 40% of the world's accessions—are exempt from the treaty and available at no charge.

Last year, CGIAR announced plans to make its collections part of a broader international network overseen by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), another of CGIAR's chief sponsors. (The third is the United Nations Development Program.) But in May CGIAR said it wants to review the legal ramifications of such an agreement. Of particular concern is whether the new arrangement would conform to current treaty negotiations over how to pay developing countries for germ plasm.

Some critics, however, see the review as a sign the World Bank wants to block the transfer to the FAO, whose administrative structure gives each country one vote, and retain more control over the fate of the samples. A statement from the Genetic Resources Action International, for example, contends "the Bank's intent is to prevent intergovernmental control" of the germ plasm.

But World Bank and CGIAR officials say those fears are unfounded. "It's preposterous," says Petit. According to one CGIAR official, control of the germ-plasm banks should be transferred to FAO this fall, at the next meeting of CGIAR's donors and center directors.

As for the broader question of whether the bailout will affect the way CGIAR does business, center officials insist that they and the donors will continue to set research priorities. "The World Bank does not control the research agenda," says Nores. Adds Farrar, "This is an organization that's run by consensus. If the World Bank ever took control, it would kill the system," he says. The bank bailout is intended to save CGIAR, says Petit, not to destroy it.

—Richard Stone

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