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## **‘One CGIAR’ with two tiers of influence? The case for a real restructuring of global ag-research centres**

Open letter to the CGIAR from the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems (IPES-Food)\*

***Reform of the CGIAR is long overdue. But on the eve of a major restructuring, we believe that the reforms on the table fall short of the fundamental change that is required, and risk exacerbating power imbalances in global agricultural development. We are concerned that the ‘One CGIAR’ reform process appears to have been driven forward in a coercive manner, with little buy-in from the supposed beneficiaries in the global South, with insufficient diversity among the inner circle of reformers, and without due consideration of the urgently-needed paradigm shift in food systems.***

While the ‘CGIAR system’ may sound like a technocratic body, few organizations have exerted as much influence as the CGIAR on today’s food systems. Since its inception at the height of the ‘Green Revolution’ in 1971, the CGIAR has driven advances in crop breeding and agricultural mechanization and modernization across multiple continents. With 10,000 scientists and technicians on its payroll, nearly 800,000 crop varieties in its 11 genebanks, and a budget soon to exceed those of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the CGIAR is a major feature in the agri-development landscape. Its mission – to develop knowledge and innovation for agriculture in the global South – is as relevant today as ever, in light of climate change, COVID-19 and a host of additional challenges.

The process now underway to reform the CGIAR is therefore imperative and of major public interest. The ‘One CGIAR’ process seeks to merge the CGIAR’s 15 legally-independent but cooperating centres, headquartered in 15 countries, into one legal entity. The impetus has come from some of its biggest funders, notably the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the World Bank, and the US and UK governments. The “fragmentation of the research agenda” under the current structure is considered to undermine CGIAR’s ability to respond to complex and rapidly-evolving challenges. Restructuring is being promoted to deliver a ‘One CGIAR Common Board’, a unified country and regional presence; more integrated programming that is aligned with the SDGs; a budget increase from \$850 million to around \$2 billion per year; and more pooled funding. Following a 1-year consultation process, the restructuring will be rubber-stamped by CGIAR centres in a vote later this month.

Reform of the CGIAR is long overdue. The system is currently under-performing on several fronts and is thoroughly ill-equipped to address the challenges food systems face, as well as newly emerging ones. However, we are concerned that the current reform process, like

previous versions, will fall far short of the fundamental change that is required, and risks exacerbating major power imbalances. These concerns relate to the reform process itself, and the underlying vision for 'One CGIAR':

**Firstly, the restructuring appears to have been advanced in a coercive manner, and without genuine buy-in from the global South.** Arguing (correctly) that COVID-19 is creating a major food crisis and insisting that the pandemic together with the climate emergency demands urgent action, the One CGIAR proponents have expedited the process. A vote on July 3 was used to establish a management committee of eight and a leadership team of three to wrap up the merger arrangements, while insisting on a final vote by the end of July. Furthermore, a 'carrot and stick' approach has been adopted: an increase in the overall CGIAR budget has been promised if the merger goes through, while centres resisting the move have allegedly been threatened with budget cuts. Across the board, insiders say that representatives from governments and agricultural institutes in the global South – the much-touted beneficiaries of the CGIAR and the Green Revolution – are generally against the merger, while the big funders and closely-affiliated scientific institutions are in favour. The two centres voting against the merger last week were the forest and agro-forestry centres headquartered in Indonesia and Kenya respectively. And while the Philippines-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) voted in favour, the representatives of the Philippine and Thai governments, as well as scientific institutes in Asia, were opposed.

**Secondly, there is insufficient diversity among the inner circle driving forward CGIAR reform.** Men from the global North – particularly from the US, UK, Canada and Australia – have long been over-represented in CGIAR leadership and governance roles. In the mid-1990s, when the CGIAR underwent an earlier restructuring, men from these four countries accounted for 85% of board chairs and directors. The CGIAR has subsequently made efforts to improve gender balance, and to bring on staff and board members from the global South. However, a true diversity of perspectives is still missing: many of those recruited have close associations with Northern universities and donor-led partnerships, while the voices of farmers, civil society and independent researchers in the global South are still largely absent. Only 7 of the 22 members of the CGIAR System Reference Group (SRG) – responsible for managing the transition process – are from the global South, of which two are already affiliated to CGIAR centres. The SRG's co-chairs, both male and from the global North, represent the Gates Foundation and (formerly) Syngenta Foundation<sup>1</sup>.

**Thirdly, the proposed restructuring fails to equip CGIAR for the urgently-needed paradigm shift in food systems.** The shortcomings of prevailing agri-development approaches are becoming increasingly clear. Notably, the 'Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa' (AGRA) – a key partner on CGIAR programmes<sup>2</sup> – has failed to deliver the increases in yields, income and food security that it had promised by 2020; AGRA focus countries have in fact seen reductions in nutritionally-important and locally-adapted crops like millet, increases

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<sup>1</sup> The foundation is legally independent from but strategically aligned with and funded by Syngenta, a wholly-controlled subsidiary of China's Sinochem Corp.

<sup>2</sup> Most recently, CGIAR announced that the ICRISAT-led AVISA project is partnering with AGRA 'to enhance uptake of modern technologies, including improved crop varieties'. <https://www.cgiar.org/news-events/news/new-partnership-in-kenya-to-boost-improved-technology-uptake-in-africas-agriculture/>

in smallholder debt, loss of control over production choices, and in some cases rising hunger.<sup>3</sup> Agroecological systems, which build resilience through crop/species diversity and natural synergies across the whole agro-ecosystem, are providing an increasingly compelling alternative. The potential of agroecology to deliver economic, environmental and social co-benefits has been recognized by a growing number of scientific assessments and international bodies.<sup>4</sup> The CGIAR has adapted its approaches since its inception at the height of the Green Revolution. Some CGIAR centres have taken steps towards systemic and rights-based approaches, particularly in their work on participatory plant breeding, farmer-managed seed systems, varietal and species diversification for nutrition and resilience, biological control and agroforestry. However, the CGIAR system has failed to mainstream these approaches. A 2017 study concluded that the “CGIAR environment was not conducive to implementing systems research”, despite the introduction of new CGIAR-wide research programmes (‘CRPs’) in 2008.<sup>5</sup> Recent analysis by Biovision and IPES-Food<sup>6</sup> found that, on average, the CRPs meet less than 20% of the indicators of systemic agroecological research.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the CGIAR’s ‘Global Integrating Programs’ are failing to adopt a food systems approach.<sup>8</sup> The patchy performance and fragmented goals of CGIAR centres and programmes reflect their dependence on specific donors. For example, the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) gets as much as 65% of its funding from the US government, the Gates Foundation, and the African Development Bank.

While the basic shortcomings have been acknowledged in the current reform process, the underlying philosophy does not appear to have shifted. The focus remains on scientific innovations being “deployed faster, at a larger scale, and at a reduced cost”, and provided to rather than developed *with* beneficiaries.<sup>9</sup> The predominant focus of some CGIAR centres on increasing the productivity of specific crops remains unchallenged. Furthermore, it is unclear how consolidation under ‘One CGIAR’ will pave the way for the context-specific, farmer-led, transdisciplinary research that is required to build resilient and sustainable food systems. By ushering in a single board with new agenda-setting powers, the restructuring may further reduce the autonomy of regional research agendas and reinforce the grip of the most powerful donors – many of whom have proven reluctant to diverge from the Green Revolution pathway.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *False Promises: The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA)*, Biba (Kenya), Bread for the World (Germany), FIAN Germany, Forum on Environment and Development (Germany), INKOTA-netzwerk (Germany), IRPAD (Mali), PELUM Zambia, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (Germany), Tabio (Tanzania) and TOAM (Tanzania). <https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/42635>

<sup>4</sup> These include the World Bank-led global agriculture assessment (‘IAASTD’), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), landmark reports from the IPCC and IPBES, and a July 2020 statement by 360 scientists from 42 countries published in *Nature Ecology & Evolution*: Wanger et al. Integrating agroecological production in a robust post-2020 global biodiversity framework. Correspondence in *Nature Ecology & Evolution* (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Leeuwis, C., Schut, M., & Klerkx, L. (2017). Systems research in the CGIAR as an arena of struggle. In: Sumberg J (Ed.). *Agronomy for development. The politics of knowledge in agricultural research*. Routledge, London, pp.59-78.

<sup>6</sup> Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & IPES-Food. 2020. Money Flows: What is holding back investment in agroecological research for Africa? Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems.

<sup>7</sup> A handful of projects are more systemic, notably the CRPs on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA) and Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE), but have comparably small budgets.

<sup>8</sup> The ‘Global Integrating Program’ on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) emphasizes biofortification and biosafety, hardly mentioning production diversification, while the Climate Change, Agriculture and Food Security (CCAFS) strategy fails to prioritize systemic approaches to climate resilience.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.cgiar.org/impact/one-cgiar/>

<sup>10</sup> For example, only 3% of projects funded by the Gates Foundation in sub-Saharan Africa are agroecological. Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & IPES-Food. 2020. Money Flows: What is holding back investment in agroecological research for Africa? Biovision Foundation for Ecological Development & International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems.

Underlying all three of these problems is the disproportionate power of a handful of actors to control the purse strings and set the global agricultural development agenda. This reality risks undermining and short-circuiting the significant efforts to consult stakeholders over the past year.

Assurances are urgently needed as to how these risks can be averted as the restructuring process moves forward and One CGIAR takes shape. For example, the composition of the One CGIAR Common Board is of primary importance, and could be an opportunity to ensure a true diversity of voices, and comprehensive representation of the constituencies the CGIAR is supposed to serve.

Furthermore, the current restructuring process must be used as an opportunity to engage in a fundamental reform and rethinking of the CGIAR's mission and modalities, with a view to:

- Putting at centre stage the views of farmers, researchers, civil society groups, and governments in the global South, and supporting transformative, transdisciplinary, agroecological research co-led by farmers and farmer organisations.
- Collaborating and sharing knowledge with a broad network of regional, sub-regional and national research centres and universities, in a way that strengthens autonomous research capacity in the global South.
- Diversifying the governance of CGIAR institutions to ensure a balanced representation by region and by gender, while including independent stakeholders.
- Enhancing CGIAR participation alongside the Rome-based agencies (FAO, IFAD, WFP) in the Committee on World Food Security (CFS).
- Integrating the science and research agenda with other components of global food systems including institutional innovations, ecological sustainability and the SDGs.

Truly democratic debate is required in order to rebuild the legitimacy and relevance of the CGIAR, and to discuss its future alongside broader questions of global food system reform. Discussing these questions at the 2021 Food Systems Summit could help to democratize the CGIAR reform process, if the Summit itself opens up to more democratic participation. This would give the Summit the legitimacy and purpose it is currently lacking.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, the CGIAR system should mirror the food system we need: decentralized, context-specific, agroecological, and with more distributed and equal power relations.

*\*The members of the IPES-Food expert panel are: Olivier De Schutter (Co-chair), Olivia Yambi (Co-chair), Bina Agarwal, Molly Anderson, Million Belay, Nicolas Brucas, Joji Carino, Jennifer Franco, Mamadou Goïta, Emile Frison, Steve Gliessman, Hans Herren, Phil Howard, Melissa Leach, Lim Li Ching, Desmond McNeill, Pat Mooney, Raj Patel, P.V. Satheesh, Maryam Rahmanian, Cécilia Rocha, Johan Rockstrom, Ricardo Salvador, Laura Trujillo-Ortega, Paul Uys, Nettie Wiebe, Yan Hairong.*

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<sup>11</sup> The 2021 Food Systems Summit Has Started on the Wrong Foot – But it Could Still Be Transformational. Op Ed by IPES-Food Co-chairs, Olivier De Schutter and Olivia Yambi, March 2020. <https://foodtank.com/news/2020/03/2021-food-systems-summit-started-on-wrong-foot-it-could-still-be-transformational/>