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Sharing Experiences on Establishment and Implementation of a Competitive Grants System in the SADC Region



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COMPETITIVE GRANT SYSTEMS FOR AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT

LESSONS LEARNT IN SADC REGION

Sharing Experiences on Establishment and Implementation of a Competitive Grants System in the SADC Region

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Worldwide there is increasing use of Competitive Grants to finance agricultural technology development and transfer as well as community development programs and environmental projects.¹ A Competitive Grants System (CGS) constitutes a tendering process where providers of specified services bid for contracts within pre-defined programmes and/or priorities or in response to specific calls for proposals. The CGS may be “completely open” for global competition, have regional or national limits, or require particular combinations of partners in a bidding “consortium” (e.g. public agricultural research institutions - PARIs, private sector, civil society, universities, faith-based and farmers’ organisations and/or with the partners coming from several countries). Broadly, the CGS enables governments to address priority research, extension and other rural development needs and simultaneously serve to “jumpstart” an agricultural services reform process. Under the CGS, funds are allocated competitively to public and/or private research and development institutions to implement contractually agreed activities.

There are, however, many different types of CGS; they can be either focused on competition or on facilitating partnerships, they can be “bottom-up” or “top-down”, be based on “full funding” or require “counterpart funding, etc. The appropriate design of a CGS depends on a thorough analysis of what is expected by the stakeholders and what their capacities are, and therefore on determining the key objective(s) of the CGS. The CGS can be particularly useful and effective when: (i) there are a large number of potential service providers; (ii) for new areas of work that can be completed in a short time; (iii) benefits of competition are high in relation to the transaction costs involved in a CGS²; and, (iv) when the desired results are known and can be used as clear and unambiguous selection criteria for projects to be awarded with grants.

A core principle of a CGS is that “funds follow performance” which means that institutions without the capacity to “deliver the goods” (and where it has become clear that notwithstanding serious effort, such ability cannot be relatively easily established), lose access to research operating funding and face the danger of increasingly becoming moribund and irrelevant. As has been the case, institutions from outside the SADC region with relatively strong human and financial resources, and management capacity, have been much more successful in qualifying for grants than local NARS entities, indicating that the initial assumption that the institutions in the region had the capacity to compete and implement the awarded contracts was wrong. Consequently, most scientists of the public NARS consider the current CGS as ignoring the need for the countries of the region to build greater capacity in public research institutions.

Indeed, a fair competition can be organized when there are no asymmetric conditions between the competitors. In a regional context and especially in SADC, where a large number of countries with relatively small NARS is involved, there are likely to be significant benefits from closer collaboration between the NARS entities in different countries through regional networking and partnership arrangements fuelled by CGS. It is highly unlikely that a single country will on its own mobilize the

¹ In this paper, the Competitive Grant activities as a whole are referred to as a CG “System,” as this is often a broader, longer-range financing mechanism, even though it is currently (in the SADC region) financed entirely as part of the short-term FIRCOP and ICART projects. This note will generally use the term competitive grants system or CGS, although it is recognized that most CGS-financed sub-projects are implemented under contractual arrangements rather than as pure “grants” and that many programs involve co-financing and/or counterpart funding of sub-projects.

² Transaction costs for CGS have been reported to range between 3 and 30% of the amounts available for grants (see “Best Practice for Innovation Funding” by M. Whiteside, January, 2007). Efficiency can be gained if funding from different sources/donors can be pooled and administered by one GMU and processes and procedures harmonised to operate through a single uniform system.

critical mass (of human expertise, facilities and funds) required to address the full range of agricultural R&D issues presented by its diverse agro-ecologies and the range of socio-economic conditions of its farming communities, and much can be gained by a rational sharing of mandates, facilities and personnel and effective mechanisms to jointly address these.

Rationale and Objectives of CGS

A CGS is created in part to bring about lasting changes in the service (research) delivery structures of developing and developed countries (and regions); the competitive approach is intended to facilitate new ways of doing business (“business unusual”) in agricultural R&D, including in the collaboration between NARS institutions and the International Agricultural Research Centers (IARCs). The assumption is that there is research talent present outside the public research institutions and universities, and that commercial firms and consultancy groups can collaborate to challenge the existing research monopoly for available public or donor funding and introduce new ideas, improved efficiencies and closer alliances resulting in enhanced impact, and in the process providing inspiration for the traditional research sector to renew itself. By untying research funding from research execution by specific institutes, new research arrangements (and even institutions) can be created with enabling conditions that overcome existing bureaucracies. An underlying assumption for the effective and rapid introduction of CGS however, is that the competing institutions are interested in collaboration, that they have the capacities required to prepare high-quality proposals and that there is a relatively large number of “qualified” institutions so that competition becomes real. In CGS, there is often strong emphasis on producing results and impacts quickly.

Specific objectives and characteristics of particular CGS vary depending on the needs of a country or region. However, for most CGS there are several common objectives including the following:

- a) Quickly re-directing technology development and transfer efforts by focusing on newly emerging high priority areas linked to national policies, regional concerns and client-identified constraints.
- b) Promoting NARS reform by requiring competition for funding provided through an autonomous or semi-autonomous body.
- c) Creating a more demand-driven research and extension agenda by requiring that users and beneficiaries participate in priority setting, proposal preparation and execution.
- d) Fostering partnerships and collaboration through joint proposal preparation and execution and by encouraging the widest possible participation of potential providers.
- e) Making technology development and transfer activities more cost-effective and pluralistic by broadening the list of providers to include Universities, private firms and individuals, and NGOs.
- f) Improving proposal quality and innovation by clear, transparent, professional and anonymous scientific/technical review and evaluation, and through training.
- g) Facilitating competition by widely advertising the program and guidelines for application.
- h) Introducing a simple financial and administrative process that balances efficiency and accountability.
- i) Providing for adequate and timely operating costs to better utilize existing investments in Agricultural Knowledge and Information System (AKIS) infrastructure and staffing.
- j) Increasing the total available financing for technology development and transfer by mobilizing funds from farmers, industry and other sources.

- k) Introducing a system of thorough monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment of technologies being developed and transferred.

There is also frequently an often unstated CGS objective. Where the public sector research and extension establishment is inefficient but firmly entrenched and resistant to change, a CGS may be set up to “outflank” the existing system by creating a parallel one that is more effective and responsive to clients in producing results. The expectation is that when the two systems are compared, the existing system will be encouraged to reform.

The “classic” CGS advertises a Call, specifying its criteria, sets a date for proposal submission, assesses bids and approves grants, and pays out the funds on the basis of regular (quarterly or half-yearly) technical and financial progress reports. In regional CGS, calls for the submission of research proposals are either open or prescribed within the regional priorities and those of the research portfolios of ongoing (regional) collaborative networks which are derived from the regional agricultural research and development strategy and the R&D plans of member countries which in turn should be grounded in the core concerns of farmers and other clients of agricultural research³.

A fundamental premise is that funded projects should demonstrate that they will provide greater net benefits than would be the case for other proposals. The competitive grant system under the ICART project, for example, was instituted to improve regional performance of agricultural research and training. The competitively funded regional projects would be demand-driven, with a priority given to small-scale farmers’ development, and provide results to address rural development priorities and technologies for: efficient use of natural resources and improvement of sustainable market-oriented smallholders’ production systems and natural resource conservation. They would also enhance research-farmer-extension linkages and improve transfer and adoption of technology through farmers’ organizations to support the agricultural production systems.

In many CGS, eligibility for participation is defined. Funding may open competition to all interested organisations within the NARS of the countries of the region or even including institutions from outside the region. Another funding option is to support only specific broadly-recognized (ongoing) priority research programs in which funding is available to only institutions within member countries with demonstrated competence in areas relevant to that priority; or (iii) unspecified support could be provided to “non-NARS” institutions to undertake research to support the attainment of regional R&D goals, especially where the expertise being provided is non-existent or not resident in the region.

The SADC Competitive Grants programmes

Three regional Competitive Grants (CGs) have been implemented within the SADC region since 2004: the “Sub-Saharan Africa Challenge Program (SSA-CP) under the auspices of FARA/CGIAR; the Fund for Innovative and Regional Collaborative Projects (FIRCOP) which was supported by French bilateral aid; and the “Competitive Regional Agricultural Research Fund” (CRARF) which is a component of the European Union-financed “Implementation and Coordination of Agricultural Research and Training” (ICART) Project. All the three programmes under which research grants were awarded had the ultimate objective of strengthening the research activities by the SADC National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) on key research domains through constructive competition expected to facilitate the establishment of partnerships, networking and closer cooperation between research

³ There has been a persistent accusation from within the SADC region that there has not been the required level of “bottom-up” priority setting to derive regional priorities, and that most of the programmes were “designed by consultants” without adequate stakeholder consultation.

institutions in the SADC countries. However, the three CGS appear to have been characterized by quite different goals, approaches and methodologies as summarized below.

SSA-Challenge Programme

The roles and responsibilities of FARA and the CGIAR regarding ownership of the SSA-Challenge Programme were not always clear. There was often controversy as to whether the SSA-CP was a FARA project that others were supporting or whether it was a CG Challenge Programme. The clarification on 'owner' had implications on key issues regarding focus on 'cutting edge science' or on 'impact on farmers' livelihoods'. Consequently, the extent of involvement of SADC in determining and directing the research agenda that the programme supported in the region appears to have also been minimal.

The SSA-CP was to be implemented in large and heterogeneous "Pilot sites", with a wide range of activity types envisioned involving approaches that were new to many of the implementers. In the SADC region, the Zimbabwe/Malawi/Mozambique "Pilot Learning Site" was selected and action was to be based on a set of identified hypotheses and entry points that would result in improved incomes and livelihoods for smallholder farming communities through Integrated Research for Development (IAR4D). The eight entry points advertised in the research call were as follows: diversification within tobacco and cotton systems; promotion of integrated wildlife-livestock systems; promotion of horticulture systems; improved root and tuber systems; improved legume systems; drought mitigation systems; improved crop/livestock/fish systems; and, timber and non-timber forest product systems.

Forty two (42) scientific "Consortia" applied and the entire proposal review and selection process was coordinated by the FARA Secretariat in Accra. From the SADC point of view, only 5 consortia were worth further consideration by FARA, out of which only 2 were not led and/or heavily dominated by the CGIAR centers. The final selection of three consortia by FARA eliminated all consortia not heavily dominated by CGIAR centers. The contribution of NARS in the SADC region, and the budget allocated to them by the Challenge Programme is thus considered marginal.

FIRCOP Programme

The SADC Secretariat and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed on December 6, 2002 a financing agreement of € 1.6 million to establish and manage a competitive fund to support research activities for small-scale farmer development. The aim of this program was to improve the performance of the small-scale farmer and so contribute to the poverty alleviation of the rural population: by, strengthening the coordination between the NARS; promoting regional integration to improve the impact of research and training activities; and, facilitating and stimulating regional innovative research and training activities. The FIRCOP grants were awarded by a "Steering Committee" (comprising SADC region experts in R&D) on the basis of a scientific and technical evaluation by a "Scientific Committee" composed of contracted eminent scientists from the region (and a French expert). Implementation of awarded projects was back-stopped by high level SADC region (and foreign-based) scientists.

The FIRCOP supported research projects in 14 Priority Thematic Areas grouped under three categories:

- a) **Technology development and transfer for small-scale farming development:** Improvement of farming systems; Technologies for crop improvement, management and protection; Diversification of the production; Technologies for livestock management and animal and health control; and, Post harvest technology development and transfer.
- b) **Economic and empowerment of small-scale farming:** Improvement of household management; Improvement of commodity marketing channels in relation to market policies; Improvement of services, inputs and technology delivery systems; Empowerment of farmers' organizations; and, Impact of globalization on small-scale farming.
- c) **Agro-ecosystem management:** Land water management and conservation at household and community levels; Management of common renewable resources; Use and exchange of genetic resources; and, Land use planning and land use tenure related issues at community and local governments' levels.

FIRCOP recognized that most NARI entities, private research institutions and NGOs in the region were not adequately prepared for competition and/or for designing international collaborative arrangements. Projects would be implemented through collaborative Consortia between public and private research institutions, and universities; and all approved projects would be led by an institution based within one of the SADC countries with CGIAR and other "Advanced Research Institutions" (ARIs) only in an "advisory and support role". Projects responding to a call for proposals would have a minimum value of US\$50,000 and maximum value of US\$200,000 over a three-year period. To forestall "unbalanced" sharing of funds FIRCOP also imposed a requirement of each of 3-5 participating institutions in a project, receiving at least 20% of the total grant. In addition, participating institutions had to contribute significant counterpart funds (mainly staff and administrative support).

The process of inviting proposals and approving grants took almost three years, leading the French Government to reduce the time frame of approved projects from 3 to 2 years. One hundred and three "Concept Notes" (CNs) were received in response to the first Call and 35 were approved for preparing "Full Proposals" (FPs). Only one of the initially received FPs (lead by a South African institution) was considered acceptable and a process of training and capacity building was initiated with the remaining 34 (potential) Consortia to achieve high quality proposals. About half of these were supported with a "project preparation grant" to facilitate one stakeholder workshop to finalize/endorse the proposal. Eventually, only 12 FPs were selected for a final intensive preparation in among others: experimental plans and formats, log-frames, M&E, budget formulation, outcome indicators, and environmental impact assessment. Finally only eight FPs were approved for grant award (with specific instructions for close monitoring of implementation of the approved projects). The 8 projects involved 28 institutions in 10 of the 15 SADC countries.

ICART Project

Two competitive grant types were awarded under ICART: the Competitive Regional Agricultural Research Fund (CRARF) and the Regional Training Programme (RTP). The CRARF was established to improve the performance of agricultural research interventions in the SADC region, by helping the region to redirect technology development on emerging priority areas linked to national policies and client-identified constraints; promoting NARS reform by requiring competition; promoting demand-driven research; fostering partnerships through joint proposal preparation with stakeholders and; improving quality of proposals and promoting innovation.

Grants would be awarded to teams whose proposals aimed at reducing poverty by making agriculture more competitive to raise poor farmers' incomes; offsetting the high rate of natural resource degradation with a focus on soil, water and biodiversity; and developing effective policy options, institutional and farmers' organizations to support agricultural production and link farmers to product markets. It was expected that competitively funded research projects would provide results to address rural development priorities and that technologies would be made available for: efficient use of natural resources and improvement of sustainable market-oriented smallholders' production systems, natural resource conservation, and research-farmer-extension linkages and developed farmers' organizations are improving transfer and adoption of technology to support the agricultural production systems. Proposed research interventions were required to consider the comparative advantages of investments by the farmer into the proposed technologies vis-à-vis alternative investments accessible for the family; the required conditions for the implementation of any proposed technologies (e.g. availability and affordability of inputs - land, water, labour etc.); the monitoring of natural and economic risks; the social acceptance of the proposed innovations (drudgery, appropriation of the natural resource, hierarchy between people and other costs to the social capital); gender issues within the proposed workplan; the working environment imposed on farming families as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the impact on the environment (e.g. modification of the natural biodiversity, introduction of invasive species, altered balance between pests and diseases and the organisms limiting their propagation, modification of vegetation cover - especially for livestock systems, changes in land use and encroachment on marginal lands and humid areas and corresponding problems for land and water conservation, pollution by effluents and wastes, toxic components and residue products, plant nutrient depletion).

Consequently, and based upon the SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) and that of FARA and the CAADP-NEPAD agendas five regional priority areas were identified for funding under ICART-CRARF. These were:

- a) **Strengthening of appropriate technology generation for small-scale farming:** The majority of small-scale farmers live in fragile and marginal environments, characterized by low soil fertility and limited water, high pest and disease pressure and poor access to markets. As a result, farm productivity is often low leading to low farmer household incomes and food insecurity. Technologies should be identified, tested and evaluated in the context of the main categories of livelihoods and farming systems within specified target areas. This evaluation should combine technical, social, economic and environmental aspects. Identification of the social targets of the research should be based on the identification of the food security and income strategies of small-scale farmers, on their natural resource base and their means of working. The evaluation of the proposed innovations should consider the potential

for the marketing of production surpluses and/or the impact on the management of food shortages for the family unit.

- b) **Technology development for the processing of agricultural products:** There has been a tremendous shift to value addition in agricultural production brought about by new product development, shifting consumer demands, changes in market trends, technological developments and niche market opportunities that have differentiated products from commodities. Research and development should aim at the creation of a better added value for the producers through the development of new (or adapted) technologies for processing and conservation (including better quality and standards) of agricultural products to facilitate access to market. This would support diversification of options for household income. Proposed technologies should be scrutinized within a production chain approach, involving the gatherers, producers and processors. Proposals should also consider marketing potentials at local, provincial or international levels and the comparative advantages of investments by the producers and processors in the proposed technologies vis-à-vis alternative investments accessible to those stakeholders.
- c) **Empowerment of small-scale farmers and development of production chains and production to consumption chains:** Farmer empowerment is interpreted to mean improvement in access to information regarding the production processes, inputs, markets and the support that can be provided to farmers in enhancing their production capability by improving their asset base. This priority area is aimed at the promotion of local social structures that will facilitate access to natural resources or ease the management of shared resources - issues relating to the development of local agricultural services (e.g. entrepreneurial service for soil preparation, land clearing, irrigation, post-harvest operations, collecting wood and gathered products, decentralised credit service, technical advisory services, veterinary services etc), impact of innovative social organisations in agriculture on more traditional social structures and rules for accessing natural resources, impact of contractual agriculture development and cottage industries on traditional access to resources, on livelihoods etc, evaluation of commodity chains in order to assess the share of risks and added values to the various stakeholder groups, analysis of existing relationships between agricultural service providers and farmers and the research for innovative arrangements for the provisions of those services to individual farmers or to farmer organisations, scientific evaluation of technological and organizational innovations concerning improved access of small scale farmers to information about production process, the use of natural resources, inputs, markets (economic and social feasibility and impact, schedule of conditions, etc), impact of induced organisational changes in the biological components of farming on the environment, etc.
- d) **Agriculture and the environment:** This priority area specifically addresses impact of agriculture on the environment through the combination of technical measures, economic incentives, taxation, rules and regulations etc. On the basis of identified agricultural practices and production systems that are environmentally negative, technical innovations will be identified, tested and evaluated by multi-disciplinary teams on relevant ecosystems and production systems. Proposals may address biodiversity changes, introduction of invasive species as a consequence of developing agricultural production, changing balances of pest and diseases and factors limiting

their propagation on crops, spread of animal diseases, effect of introducing GMOs, changes in vegetation cover, land use practice etc. Proposals may also address environmental issues arising from processing of agricultural products either on farm or by industry. Furthermore proposals may suggest research on recycling of organic wastes in agriculture, soil amendment, plant nutrients, animal feed, support for mushroom production etc.

- e) **Agricultural policy and development of services to agriculture:** Research in four broad areas would be supported: a) **Impact of adopted agricultural policies** - prevailing agricultural policies and their impact on rural livelihoods and on commodity chains, comparative studies of alternative policy options, impact of trade agreements on agriculture, development of economic models and policy measures that could help the farming communities to develop alternative production scenarios; b) **Improved services to agriculture** - financing agricultural and rural development, innovative models for incentives and regulations governing emergence of professional and private sector groups; c) **Mitigating measures for food security** - new ways of food production (e.g. diversification of the crop mix, development of water harvesting and irrigation, innovative animal raising systems, poverty vulnerability of farming families, management of safety nets for the vulnerable and/or marginalised sections of the rural population, wealth creation potential of rural families and the ability to withstand/buffer against periods of adversity, etc; d) **Diversification and intensification of agricultural production systems** - comparative advantages of groups of producers, role of public infrastructures, of supportive measures to the small-scale and medium scale enterprises in rural areas, of policies supporting co-operation agreements between stakeholders within particular commodity chains for the promotion of agricultural diversification and the improvement of competitiveness, documentation of the role of innovation and public support to the generation of innovation, the role of legislation etc.

A Consultancy was engaged to prepare and launch a Call for Proposals (in line with the 9th EDF rules and regulations) under the Competitive Fund for Agricultural Research to which €5.6 million was allocated. This included all necessary documentation including the final draft of the Call for Proposals, relevant guidelines, administrative and technical rules for participation and any other necessary documents. The team also held an awareness workshop to inform stakeholders about the objectives, methods and expected results of the ICART project in general and the criteria, procedures and rules for application to the competitive funds for agricultural research in particular, in addition to providing a Help Desk facility for grant applicants to advise and assist them in the compilation of their applications. The assessment process⁴ was undertaken through a Consultancy involving four experts in the fields of Farming Systems, Crops Research, Animal Production, Natural Resources and Socio-economics.

Forty nine (49) Consortia applied; in the end only 7 projects were approved; of these 4 were led by UK-based institutions and 3 by CGIAR Institutes. Thus, although the proportion of the total ICART grant amount allocated to activities implemented by institutions located within the SADC region [which generally operate under severe financial constraints] may be substantial, the capacity to lead is evidently lacking.

⁴ Final Report, Consultancy to assess proposals for the SADC Competitive Regional Agricultural Research Fund (ICART CRARF). June 2006.

KEY ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL “REGIONAL” CGS⁵

In the last two decades, there has been an increasing use of CGS to finance agricultural technology development and dissemination, first on a national basis and more recently also on a global and regional basis. This worldwide experience with mostly “national” CGS, in terms of rationale, the typical designs, implementation lessons, strengths and weaknesses and future challenges has been summarized in Annex 1. Although primarily based on national experience, these implementation lessons are also relevant to other (e.g. regional) CGS. Considerable experience with regional CGS has been recently gained and important findings are summarized below. Some of the important ones are: the need for realistic expectations - getting a CGS up and running effectively takes time; the need for broad commitment from Government(s) and stakeholders and for good (i.e. fully transparent) governance; close stakeholder involvement in CGS design and priority setting; a broad base of potential participants or competitors (and proposal reviewers); detailed “Operational Manuals” re-enforced by training programs and back-up assistance in research proposal development and implementation; establishment of ceilings on awards to a single institution; efficient and transparent program management; and the need to “start small” and “learn by doing”.

Autonomous and transparent structure and governance

Strong and independent governance is essential for the success of any CGS. Standard practice has been to have three standing committees: one for policy guidance, a second one for approving grants and the third for technical review of proposals. A pattern of rotational membership on each of the three committees needs to be in-built so as to ensure continuity and institutional memory, while introducing new ideas by new members.

The governing body should be high profile, autonomous, pluralistic and take decisions, including allocating resources, in accordance with agreed priorities and procedures. A “Committee of (senior) Country/Stakeholder-group Representatives” who are based in the region and have a high level of broadly shared trust, should retain overall responsibility for policy guidance. Experts from “outside” or direct oversight by the grant-financing donor are not an adequate substitute and risk that stakeholders will not feel strong ownership. A separate smaller autonomous body should be charged with strategic oversight, approval of research proposals and authorisation of grants. Members to this later body should be selected on the basis of their regional stature, experience, skills to enhance transparency and independence.

A technically and scientifically competent group is required to review the proposals submitted in response to Calls and assist with monitoring of the progress and performance of the projects that have been commissioned/funded. Where it is maintained as a standing committee, it should consist of several (10 to 15) members with a wide mix of disciplinary skills and institutional backgrounds and individual members who meet the criteria for scientific excellence. It is not necessary, for example, that each member country has a representative on the group who can speak for national interests. It is preferable that members are persons not likely to be close to researchers implementing (potentially) funded projects as this may compromise their objectivity. There should also be a provision for short-term appointments of independent peer reviewers where it is felt the necessary expertise is lacking in the standing committee. Another option is to maintain a register of a pool of

⁵ Mainly drawing on a January, 2007 note by A.L. Ange, Technical Advisor, SADC FANR; note by Jacob Kampen for use at a SADC-MAPP Team meeting of January 15, 2007 and Working Paper 5 for the SADC-MAPP design; and ASARECA CGS Lessons Learning Paper No. 1 of 2006 and Paper No.2 of 2008 by C. Tizikara, ASARECA-CGS Research Manager. Additional lessons discussed based on experience gained in the context of World Bank-financed agricultural R&D projects in developing countries - See for example: Kampen, 1997; Pamela George, 2000, 2002; Ruben G. Echeverria and Howard Elliott, 2000, 2002; Byerlee, 2003;

experts and select teams on the basis of required expertise. However this later option often creates administrative problems as these experts are not contractually committed to be always available whenever needed.

A core team of staff constituting a Grants Management Unit (GMU) needs to be appointed to take responsibility for day-to-day CGS management, including planning, budgeting and financial management. Planning of the technical content of Research Calls and the management and monitoring of commissioned projects should be an iterative process between the CGS governance teams above and other regional stakeholders.

Realistically, there is no CGS in SADC – what exists are projects run by separate units that offer grants for research and training, using some competitive principles, processes and procedures. Apart from the Project Coordinating Units (PCUs) which assumed the responsibility of GMUs, there seem to have been no other institutionalised structures reminiscent of a CGS. There is no Fund to support a sustained system; there are no broadly agreed research priorities as yet; and the different “funds” operated with heavy influence of regulations and procedures of the donor.

Formulation and Submission of Research Proposals

With a regional CGS, the research which is supported must contribute towards achieving the regionally agreed desired results and strategic objectives. It is therefore essential that focussed and prescriptive research calls are developed that reflect the priorities in the overall regional strategy and those of currently ongoing collaborative programs. In practice, often insufficient time and effort is allowed for thorough priority setting assuring that truly demand-driven programs evolve. This appears to be a serious issue in the SADC region. The formulation of Calls may also involve consultation through special workshops and stakeholder meetings to agree on thematic areas to be supported in each call for bids in the form of Research Proposals (RPs), as well as to determine the resources available for each Call. The CGS is aimed at supporting research and related activities that lead to the development of scientific knowledge and regional public goods. Two critical issues to be considered are (i) who influences the research agenda of the CGS; and, (ii) what are the basic objectives of the CGS? The research topics for RPs need to be agreed with stakeholders but the design of the Call itself should be by the GMU.

The Call should be drafted in a manner meant to ensure responses that address the totality or parts of the agreed regional result areas. The process aims to ensure the development of a relevant and balanced program that captures regional goods and spill-over from a coherent and synergistic portfolio of projects. Proposals should preferably be developed in a two-stage process. Concept Notes (CNs) are prepared with only general advice from the GMU on submission of “profiles” which are then judged more on potential (quality and relevance) than on detailed content. Thereafter, selected applicants/institutions are invited to submit “Full Proposals” (FPs) with detailed support and advice from the GMU or identified mentoring institution. Experience in regional and global CGS clearly shows the advantage of inviting CNs first, and only after screening and evaluation select a limited number to proceed with preparing FPs. This would seem particularly important in SADC where there is a demonstrated limited institutional capacity to prepare good quality proposals. Because FP preparation is expensive and time-consuming (involving different players in a number of countries), a “Project Preparation Grant” (PPG) should routinely be provided to those consortia whose CNs have been in principle approved. It is important to point out that in case PPGs are provided, the selection process at CN stage needs to be quite severe so that only a limited number of FPs is prepared with good chances (50 or 33 %) of final approval. Final selection should be based in part on a verification that adequate consultations between the partners have taken place and that projects have taken into account previous recommendations and comments from reviewers.

Management of approved projects

Various models can be considered for management of regional CGS-funded projects; these may differ by funding option, according to the type of organisation contracted to lead the project (e.g. NARS institution or an IARC) and in the way in which the GMU links with the contracted organisation(s). In the case where a lead institution is contracted to manage a regional project, the GMU may disburse advance funds directly to either the lead institution (if it has the capability and national financial regulations permit it to transfer funds to other institutions) or to each of the partner institutions (lead institution and “partners”). It is important that the total advance funding required matches the budget requirements per year (or quarter) as stipulated in the approved project contract; many national institutions are under severe financial constraints and cannot be expected to provide advance financing. The technical reports and financial accountabilities could be entrusted to the lead institution. Thus, the lead entity is assumed to be the custodian of the financial documents and obliged to make these available for audit reviews. This type of contractual arrangement reduces the need for a large administrative support unit at GMU level (but it is recognized that this could increase the support services that each lead institution provides to service all the partners and taking on the financial accountability tasks). A fundamental requirement for the appropriate model is to ensure that the partner organisations fulfil their obligations under the project contract by engaging in the agreed activities and delivering the desired research outputs in a timely fashion.

Need for broad institutional and professional participation

In many countries, public funding for agricultural research is normally through budgetary expropriation to Public Agricultural Research Institutions (PARIs), and in some cases to Universities. These are the de-facto traditional research service providers (RSPs). Diversity and capacity that can lead to effective partnerships, coalitions and true competition are essential ingredients of successful CGS. To ensure this principle is adhered to, eligibility to participate in regional CGS needs to be widened to include “non-traditional RSPs (universities, NGOs, farmers’ organisations, producers and consumers associations, agribusiness and the private sector). Introducing the CGS to all potential client institutions and professionals and ensuring that the Call for proposals is properly and widely advertised are meant to mobilize as much participation as possible. CGS-funded projects normally require at least 3 to 5 institutions, variously located in 2 or 3 member countries, as implementing agencies. Special incentives need to be provided for inclusion of weak NARS institutions on the research consortia while evaluation needs to put most emphasis on the technical quality of the proposal without heavily relying on the profiles (although experience and expertise are essential) of the individual/institutional members of the proposing team. The research teams should be encouraged to target professionals (not only scientists) in the agricultural (in the broad sense) field, including those not previously engaged in agricultural R&D.

Transparency

A number of mechanisms need to be instituted to enable participants to recognize transparency as an important element of the image of a regional CGS. The broad (region-based) constitution of the governing organs and a communication strategy to keep proponents fully and timely informed are the most important. Similarly, the full (electronic) disclosure of information related to proposal review and the constant involvement of all key stakeholders in various aspects of CGS implementation and adjustment, further enhance transparency. The Research Call and project-related documents (formats, contracts, guidelines, manuals and reports) should be available in various media forms. Ensuring that stakeholders’ views are adequately considered and incorporated is a way of demonstrating transparency and responsiveness, and thus increasing and sustaining interest in the CGS process among stakeholders.

Monitoring and Evaluation

The progress, outcomes and impact of the research (and other related activities) supported through a regional CGS need to be closely monitored and evaluated. By design, therefore, a key requirement for each (potentially supported) project is to have clear (“SMART”) indicators that can be monitored as measures of research uptake and developmental impact. All proposals submitted for CGS funding should be required to have clear M&E plans that include activities like visits to individual projects and project/review team meetings that enable exchange of experiences and documentation of lessons as inputs for the adjustment of CGS procedures, processes and formats. The design of a Management Information System (MIS) and its subsequent operation are pre-requisites for routine CGS management, of project activities and ultimate impact assessment.

Flexibility of procedures and processes

Flexibility is considered a critical ingredient of successful CGS. A regional CGS attempts to design and develop the operation of a single harmonised system for competitive funding of research which can be supported with funds from several donors and administered through a uniform system that is viewed as evolving and continuously improving. The regional representatives and the major donor partners need to endorse that the GMU develops management, financing and auditing processes that greatly simplify some of their often purely bureaucratic requirements. Approved project duration may not match the timing of available donor funding (often in part due to unexpected delays in CGS start-up). Funds may initially be allocated across programmes and funding areas but later some programmes may have more funds than they can absorb while others are under-funded. Thus there is a need to overcome issues concerning the long-term sustainability of CGS support and the capacity of the system and funding to shift in response to emerging fields of research and institutional adjustments.

Another important design consideration is whether the funds made available to institutions will merit the efforts expended by the applicants. This is crucial to actual competition. The country and institution mix, project duration and the funding limits need to be determined on this basis.

LESSONS FROM THE RESEARCH CALL AND PROPOSAL EVALUATION PROCESS**Achieving the core objective of empowering the NARS**

For the three CGS implemented, the results of the selection processes implemented seem to indicate that it is unlikely that the core objective of re-enforcing the NARS research activities will be achieved because most of the SADC NARS institutions lacked the capacity of effectively compete. Given the evident lack of capacity of regional (national) agricultural research service providers to take leadership of consortia and/or write winning proposals, the provisions for assistance and back-stopping in proposal development seem to have been inadequate. Notwithstanding publicity efforts, it is often claimed there was much confusion and misunderstanding by competing institutions concerning the selection mechanisms. Field implementation of approved activities have also been dogged with problems, largely associated with capacity to follow reporting (especially financial reporting) procedures.

A review of the ICART-CRARF documentation reveals various shortcomings in providing clear and concise instructions for applicants in a single document on what for and how to apply; the mechanisms for consultation and proposal development with stakeholders and clients seem overly bureaucratic and formal. There are repeated references to EU Aid websites which however, seem difficult to decipher. Although there is mention of the need to clearly demonstrate and articulate

demand for the research proposed, there is no explicit explanation of how the evaluation of submissions is being organized and what the exact criteria will be. The objectives of the program seem overly ambitious (poverty alleviation, production value chain development, natural resource conservation, rural policy generation, development of farmer's organizations and strengthening farmer-market linkages). The regional priority areas (for which funding is being made available) are derived from the SADC Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP), FARA and CAADP-NEPAD and appear all-inclusive; there is no clear focus. A single institution is allowed to both submit and be awarded a grant for more than one proposal which is surprising given the large numbers of interested applicants.

The general impression, for both CRARF and RTP proposals, was that the quality of the proposals is very variable. It was evident that not all applicants understood the guidelines well, and it is understandable given the length of the documentation. Some submissions did not address the required elements specified in the Call for Proposals while others did not adhere to the guidelines in the application form and did not provide sufficient detail to explain the need for their proposed programme or the content of the programme. Most submissions were generally weak in terms of the description of impact and multiplier effect, and the log frame. The assessment guidelines generally worked well. They are, of course, open to individual interpretation. They could be strengthened by distinguishing points that must be included and points that are desirable. However, more emphasis needs to be put on grading proposals in terms of the feasibility in terms of objectives, methodology, etc.

Managing the CPCP cycle

Managing the Call and Project Commissioning Process (CPCP) forms the bulk of activity of a CGS. All proposals submitted are based on advertised Research Calls and must be prepared in accordance with guidelines and any other specific requirements released with a specific call. It may involve various forms of technical backstopping to teams during preparation of proposals, compliance checks to ensure conformity to application guidelines, peer review to consider projects and provide recommendations on the acceptance of proposals, and approval. In their reports, the evaluation teams engaged for CRARF and RTP made the following specific observations:

- a) **Clarity of guidelines:** The guidelines were clear on what is expected from applicants in terms of eligibility, partnerships, themes and types of action, teaching material development, management capacity, monitoring, and costs. However, the guidelines did not elaborate on what must be included in each section of the application. It is assumed that the application form is a standard format used for a variety of purposes, and it is left to the applicant to interpret what is required. Given the variability of the proposals it might have been useful to briefly elaborate in the guidelines the issues that must be addressed in each section. This then could be linked to assessment.
- b) **Capacity building requirements in regional institutions:** A huge difference in the competencies for developing coherent proposals is evident between the north and south applicants. Regional institutions did not fare well as they lacked both technical scientific capacity and skills in producing budgeted proposals in the required format and of sufficient quality. To compete more effectively there is a need for resources to be specifically targeted to southern research institutes. Applicants from the north are proposing to conduct the work with the local partners. If they worked with the local institutions and are prepared to mentor them throughout the implementation period, this could improve the capacity of the local counterparts to develop good proposals. However, the evaluation grid did not sufficiently allow for the assessment of potential capacity building that a proposed project could

achieve. This was considered as an important area for ICART. To address this point, it was recommended that evaluation grid criterion 4.1 is developed to allow an assessment of potential capacity building. Examples of impact could be given in the grid, i.e. 'increase income, build social capital, and create local capacity in research'. In addition, the support documentation 'Guidelines for grant applicants responding to the call for proposals' Section 2 should be enhanced with details of desired capacity building.

- c) **Assessing relative importance or need of topics:** Evidence of the need for a project was seen as generally weak. Many proposals failed to link proposed actions to government strategy targets, evidence of target group prioritization of the need, evidence of private sector interest or identification of the need by previous research activity. The need for specific research, particularly commodity focused research, would be assisted by requesting the proposal writer to provide better proof of the need that the proposal addresses. This evidence could be provided in many forms such as referenced work, linkage to policy, evidence of market demand (quantity and value), co-financing by the private sector and / or reputable needs assessment in the form of PRA exercises or building on earlier R&D initiatives. Again these points need to be raised, and key words such as 'need' defined, in the 'Guidelines for grant applicants responding to the call for proposals'
- d) **Recognizing the importance of building on earlier work and improving information provided on previous research:** Many proposals built on previous work; however the proposal writers usually gave insufficient reference to related work already done on the subject. Given that agricultural research is a long term process proposals building on earlier initiatives pointing to desirable results should be favoured. This point could be added to criterion 2.5 and proposal writers requested to provide support information if relevant to their proposal.
- e) **Assessing capacity for research:** Proposal writers need further instruction in support documentation to show their capacity for research. It is important that the proposal writer should provide evidence (in the form of a short literature or subject review) that they are aware of the latest developments in the field in which they propose to work. This should include work being carried out by other research groups elsewhere in Africa (or even beyond) and should also provide evidence that the implementer and partners have a significant track record in this field and a valid contribution to make. This information would help avoid funding duplication. Too often this type of material was completely missing from proposals, leaving the evaluator with the feeling that the proposal would not achieve value for money.
- f) **Checking the competence of lead personnel and partners:** It was difficult to check the competence of lead personnel using the information provided. Proposals should include the CV of the leading staff member or team leader and/or profile of each institution. CVs of a standardized format, for the lead applicants and the key partners in each proposal, should accompany the application. A standardized format would allow comparison of competencies between proposals.
- g) **Appropriate staffing should be more obviously scored in the evaluation grid:** Proposals were often found to have inappropriate staffing. A proposal requiring one or two full time staff members in country would often have five or six short term experts being flown into the region. In addition, the balance of staff composition was often questionable. For example a market oriented proposal would give most staff time to a non-market expert while the market specialist would have a small percentage of time allocated. While this could be

reflected in criteria 3.1, 3.2, 3.5, and 5.2, the point is hidden. A sentence could be added to criterion 3.5 reading 'Is senior staff allocation appropriate with the proposed action plan'. Detail on what is seen as appropriate staffing could then be provided in the support document.

- h) Standardizing M&E - improving logical frameworks:** Most logical frameworks were seen as being unhelpful to future project management or to an evaluator. Quantification in proposals was often very weak. For example, detail of the number of farmers involved, number of staff trained, number of seed varieties tested was often missing. These are crucial measures of the expected success of the proposed action. There was also a lack of clarity in whether the objective / result or the OVI should contain the quantification element. 'Specific objectives' and 'results' require better definition. 'Purpose' and 'output' could be considered as better terms. In totality, the log frames were generally weak. This appears to reflect a lack of understanding of the purpose of a log frame and how to prepare one. ICART (through a Consultancy again) held a briefing workshop on the call for submissions. Such workshops should probably focus on briefing / training participants on such topics like how to prepare a log frame. It is intended to be the key monitoring and evaluation tool. In many instances it is difficult to see how the log frames can be effectively used for this purpose. To help, better instructions on how to produce a logical framework should be incorporated into the Guidelines for Grant Applicants. Improved guidance should better ensure committed proposal writers do it right.
- i) Logical frameworks – enhancing Criterion 3.6:** The current description of criterion 3.6 “Does the proposal contain objectively verifiable indicators (OVIs) for the outcome of the action?” is insufficient. Nearly all proposals contained OVIs but usefulness from a management or evaluation perspective was usually questionable. The question in criterion 3.6 needs rephrasing. A suggested text is “Does the logframe appropriately inform management of project progress and sufficiently guide internal and external evaluation?”
- j) Guide for time spent reviewing each proposal – approximately one and a half proposals per day:** The Terms of Reference gave an initial guide of one and a half proposals to be reviewed per evaluator per day. In hindsight, this guide is considered correct. Assessing an average of two proposals per day is considered as allocating too short a time per proposal. Some proposals are complex and require detailed reading. Reviewing a proposal in four hours is possible if the proposal is clear and succinct or if it quickly becomes an obvious candidate for rejection. Detailed or borderline proposals require more time. Time for a two to three hour team meeting mid study to review scoring could have improved scoring consistency.
- k) Awareness of bias towards the professionally written proposal:** CRARF should be aware that the current evaluation grid does allow professionally written proposals to score highly. Well written proposals submitted by a reputable organisation can score highly by getting the basics right i.e. all of Section 1, criteria 2.1, 2.5, 3.1, 3.2, 3.5 and 3.6. It is difficult to overcome this factor. One suggestion is to increase the scoring weighting to areas of the evaluation grid focused on 'need' and 'partners'. These are criteria 2.2, 2.3, 2.4, 3.3 and 3.4. The Evaluation Committee should consider raising the points available for these criteria from 5 to 10 points each. Scores from this study could be re-weighted to determine the effect on results.
- l) Provide guidance on how Criterion 2.5 will be scored:** Criterion 2.5 asks “Does the proposal contain specific elements of added value, such as innovative approaches, models for good practice, promotion of gender equality and equal opportunities, environmental protection?”

It is unclear how this should be scored. Does the proposal receive a point for each factor or five points if it achieves one or two of the requirements?

- m) **Lower the threshold for Section 2 – Relevance:** The current evaluation grid sets the threshold at 20 points out of 25 (80%) for Section 2 - Relevance. Eight out of the thirty four proposals reviewed exceeded this threshold. The recommendations provided above suggest Section 2 is in a formative stage. Given this need for enhancement, it is suggested that the threshold is currently set too high. At the moment a level of 70% is seen as appropriate. Once criteria in Section 2 are optimal, the threshold could return to the high level of 80%.
- n) **The Need for Clear Definitions:** The Guidelines for grant applicants responding to the call for proposals should include a wider glossary defining key terms. For example, applicants were found to confuse 'demonstration' and 'trials' and their use in research. While assessment trials can be research, demonstrations are not and the two must not be confused. Other terms requiring better definition include 'multiplier effect', 'impact', 'research', 'development', 'transaction cost' and the many terms used in logical frameworks (i.e. 'objective', 'result', 'output', 'outcome', 'purpose', 'indicator', 'means of verification' and 'target').
- o) **Change support documentation to rationalize per diem claims:** Per Diem claims in proposals were generally excessive. One proposal contained a budget of over Euro 200,000 for per diems. The supporting documentation is seen as encouraging these excessive claims. This documentation should make clear that per diem rates shown are maximum amounts that do not necessarily have to be claimed. It should also say that budgets may be penalized under Criterion 5.2 where per diems are considered excessive.
- p) **Dealing with 'Hidden' criteria:** There was some initial concern within the consultancy team regarding 'hidden criteria' at the beginning of the study, i.e. level of research versus development, dominance by one or a small group of service providers and geographical coverage. Experience now shows that consideration of these factors was best made after scoring had been completed during feedback meetings 'as and when' they arise.
- q) **Assessment of financial resources:** Some of the organizations submitting proposals have international and regional centres. However, the applicants only gave financial results of the international office, possibly overshadowing the financial crisis that the regional office might be facing. Therefore, the assessor would give a high score under criterion 1.4 (for the international office) when it would have been low for the regional office. The same applies to universities versus specific programs/faculties within the universities i.e. the University would score higher than the faculty. Where the regional office is the lead applicant proof of financial viability is required for this body rather than a wider umbrella organization. This should be emphasized in section 4.2 of the 'Guidelines for grant applicants responding to the call for proposals'.
- r) **Languages and translation:** There does not appear to be a level playing field for applicants from francophone and lusophone countries. Translation was not always of the necessary quality. CRARF should emphasize this point to applicants where English is not the first language.
- s) **Reserve proposal:** The evaluation left no 'reserve' projects in case one or more of the selected proposals withdraws.

- t) **Indigenous/Intellectual property rights:** For approved proposals with implications of intellectual property rights, the applicants should be asked to develop an appropriate mechanism for safe-guarding intellectual property rights related to local indigenous knowledge and national biodiversity during contract negotiation,. SADC / ICART – CRARF has a duty of care to member countries in this area, to prevent any commercial exploitation without appropriate benefits to local guardians of biodiversity being secured. Better still does SADC have a regional policy on IPR?

LESSONS FROM IMPLEMENTATION OF GRANT PROJECTS

Regional CGS are especially complex for two main reasons. First, the regionality principle usually imposes a requirement for projects to involve partnerships between organisations in several countries. Secondly, the CGS often has multiple objectives which may sometimes be difficult to reconcile: it may aim to increase the efficiency and quality of agricultural research that targets regional priorities; seek to ensure that research is demand-led, has clear developmental impact, operates through multi-stakeholder approaches and engages organisations with an appropriate set of complementary skills. At the same time, the CGS may be designed to help build research capacity in countries with less well-resourced agricultural research systems which have relatively weak research and development organisations that have difficulties winning funds competitively and are likely to be less effective in delivering and promoting innovative research outputs. It is considered more productive to conduct capacity building as a complementary activity outside the CGS rather than attempting to build this into the design of projects. Other key specific concerns often expressed by several stakeholders, include: the CPCP taking too long a time, guidelines and formats used being complex, contracted budgets being small and not providing adequate incentive for participation and commitment, and complicated contracting and contractual arrangements. The major lessons are described in greater detail in the sections below:

Addressing regional priorities and evidence of demand

The research calls issued under the three programmes, to a large extent, were in line with the SADC-RISDP strategic priorities. The ICART and FIRCOP programmes, in particular, provided SADC-FANR with an opportunity to mainstream some of its key principles within participating organisations through the research that is commissioned. The calls issued had a strong ‘research for development’ focus and highlighted the need for clear demand articulation, end user participation, multi-disciplinarity and attention to environmental and gender issues in addition to showing evidence of involvement of all project partners in the planning of the project and the mutual benefit of each one in terms of activity and budget allocation. Projects were also required to have explicit plans for technology up-scaling and communication strategies. These and other requirements specified in the calls provided a sound basis for positive change in the way that NARS institutions conduct research. The rate of progress achieved much depended on the extent to which project teams addressed these issues and the extent to which their monitoring and evaluation processes captured and reported on them.

Despite the above, it has also been expressed that the interpretation of the call statements was a source of ambiguity and possibly a disappointment to some applicants. Research Calls were broad, across a wide range of subjects and not prescriptive enough to focus on a few key scientific domains that could be considered immediate priorities. A basic concern is also the limited manner in which stakeholders and clients were involved in deciding on the scope, focus and prioritization of thematic areas. The arrangements for meaningful consultation with beneficiaries, SADC entities, concerned

donors and other stakeholders appear to have been weak. Although the responses covered all the broad areas advertised, the selected projects addressed only narrow components of the topics. The debate has always been whether Competitive Grants for agricultural research should be organized on a wide range of subjects, with the risks that a number of very important subject matters are finally not addressed by the selected proposals, or to focus the Call for Proposals on a set of scientific domains. But even then, there is also the question of consistency and wholesomeness of the entire research programme. Within each broad area, there is a need to sequence activities and determine a critical/optimal level of effort that will generate impact and hence direct research investment. It is important that the Calls and responses received are analysed to ensure a succession of projects that can deliver outputs to final utilisation.

Addressing the key issues of rural development and agricultural production through accurate corporate research programs

Research calls were crafted to describe, as clearly as possible, the research assignment including the 'justification for it in the context of the SADC developmental rationale for the theme/thrust of the research, features in the research design that would be evaluated (including incentives to stimulate serious attention to desired features) and budget ceilings and budgeting rules. The main competition would principally be between ideas and not thematic areas or disciplines or institutions. Proposals that passed the eligibility screening were evaluated for technical content - at least two panel members served as reviewers for each proposal. Reviewers evaluated the applications on the basis of scientific merit, relevance and significance of the proposed contribution to SADC goals and priorities, and institutional/professional ability to do the job. From the results of the reviews, and comments/feelings expressed thereafter, and concerns raised during implementation, the following general conclusions can be made:

- a) Competitive processes consume a significant amount of resources for administration, and for participation (time and energy expended by applicants and their institutions in preparing and submitting proposals) relative to the chances of winning and grant funds awarded, yet there is no guarantee of continuation of funding after the initial grant period.
- b) The competitive principle penalized the weaker NARS institutions that did not have the technical expertise to lead or even appropriately respond to competitive research calls, and administrative processes that could not permit them to meet some of the administrative criteria (e.g. requirement of up-to date audited accounts for government institutions).
- c) The project mode of funding under CGS does not suit research problems that require a longer-term approach, or new methods of working, or where it is difficult to show impact in a short period, and also does not build institutional capacity since research teams only exist for a short period.
- d) The principle of scientific excellence can be compromised by super-imposing conditions of regionality and partnership that does not always favour selection of the best research team.
- e) In the case of ICART, the subsidiarity principle was compromised by taking decisions about selected proposals away from a "regionally constituted stakeholder organ" and entrusting it to the SADC Secretariat. However, it was also necessary to take strategic decisions at the Secretariat level, which is less susceptible to local pressures to solve local problems than Member States' representatives, who in some cases may bring in national sentiments.

- f) Review criteria and hence formats should be structured to reflect: relevance and responsiveness to an advertised call; methodology; operational capacity and expertise demonstrating shared responsibility, synergies and complementarities; and indicative budget. Where a 2-stage review process is followed, successful teams should be facilitated to prepare full proposals which normally should not require technical review but checking for completeness, responsiveness to CN reviewer comments, logframe and budget. This way it is possible to reduce the CPCP cycle.
- g) Projects need not necessarily have similar budget ceilings. These should vary between calls in accordance with the magnitude of the problem and the resources needed to address it.
- h) Spending levels were low or high in some cases because the activity schedules and associated budgets and disbursement amounts were often unrealistic. Initial advances need to take into account the probability that utilization of funds will be lower than anticipated, because of initial start-up problems. Disbursements also often took long because of faulty financial accountabilities, usually involving very complicated reporting formats.
- i) To maintain demand, relevance and ownership stakeholder meetings held before or after the full proposal training workshops to document and indicate national activity plans with assigned responsibilities for each of the identified key stakeholder in the project proved very useful.
- j) A balance between results delivery against equity is important. An assessment of NARS capacity to lead projects and utilize research funds efficiently is an important factor in determining participation. In addition, a closer look at partnership arrangements to ensure complementarity among participating organisations is necessary. Active stewardship from the GMU and technical inputs and support from scientific partners generally improved performance. Project teams needed support to design, learn from and document action research that leads to co-innovation among the different actors in the value chain.
- k) Monitoring and evaluation plans for projects need to have a strong emphasis on qualitative indicators that measure outcomes and impacts, and not just enumerating activities completed.
- l) Generally, CGS require significant investment of time and resources in the early stages before the benefits start to be realized. This is partly because such schemes are complex to administer. In addition, participating organisations need time to adjust to the requirements of competitive processes as most are not familiar with them.

Regional Networking

The CGS is a furtherance of an inter-institutional networking mechanism that promotes research collaboration amongst researchers and thus not only builds institutional and human capacity but also provides a focus around which regional collaboration could be built. In SADC region, fourteen active collaborative research networks focusing on information sharing and technology dissemination for a range of commodities and practices, 8 “inactive” networks and another eight “potential”⁶ networks were identified in 2006. Coordination of these networks was being provided by the SADC Secretariat, specialized regional and national organizations and CGIAR-affiliated institutions. Within the work programming of the CRARF projects and additional support through the “Support to Regional Research Networks” component of the ICART project, travel, mentoring and training increased

⁶ Main Report - Situation analysis of agricultural research and training in the SADC region, Part 2: Network Strategy. ICART Project, July 2008.

understanding and broadened horizons of researchers and research stakeholders likewise. Collaboration led to a sharing of regional resources and information and provided mini-networks of support to individual scientists. The network structure created a pool of researchers capable of addressing the development requirements of the region. The CGS served as a mechanism to increase their efficiency and effectiveness. Grant recipients are encouraged and supported to present their results at international conferences and in world-class research journals. In general, the CGS is developing and strengthening research processes and skills in the region.

The projects which had the strongest partnership arrangements tended to be those which built on previous or existing initiatives and where there was strong potential for joint learning from the different systems that operate. Furthermore, the administrative capacity of an organization to lead, facilitate participation or even implement delegated activities and responsibilities in a project proved critical for success and should be scrutinized before a contract is awarded. Because these difficulties may not always be foreseen or may not be politically correct, CGS should adopt a flexible mechanism in which a change of the principal investigator(s) can be considered.

Multi-stakeholder involvement

There is uneven representation of the 15 member state countries and stakeholder institutional categories both in terms of numbers and budget shares in all the projects approved. There were also indications where the advantage of including a particular category of stakeholder was not clearly demonstrated, either because they were included as a requirement or they lost interest along the way (usually because of budget share and the administrative requirements for participation. In many, there is no obvious complementarity of inputs from organisations from the different countries. Instead, there is a large additional management burden imposed on the lead institution from working with an organization in a third country, with which it may not have had any previous contact. This seems to outweigh any potential short term benefit to be gained from the wider reach of the project activities. Proposals should only be approved where there is clear complementarity and added value from the involvement of the multiple partners. In practice, building capacity for an identified partner may be a more important consideration than complementarity but this needs to be balanced against the likelihood of reduced efficiency.

Maintaining stakeholder interest

The CPCP cycle took relatively long – one year for ICART and 3 years for FIRCOP. Although not very evident in this case, participation could be seriously undermined by the lengthy approval process and low incentives. Since competition was largely at the Concept Note stage, it would seem more plausible to take funding decision then so that winning teams get re-assurance and more commitment. Maintaining stakeholder participation (donors providing funding, scientists responding to research calls and having commitment to delivering project outputs and attaining project outcomes) and assuring all applicants that the content of their proposal is driving its evaluation and to justify all actions taken on the basis on competitive processes are key challenges that have to be contended with in a CGS.

Although to a large degree, the proposal selection criteria represented what the NARS institutions are concerned about, not only in their proposals but also in their overall operations, the research call and guidelines which were combined in one document became quite lengthy and often with many cross-references to guidelines of the donor. It is often desirable to issue the call and guidelines as separate documents. The Call could be a 1-2 pages announcing dates and research areas. Prospective applicants who develop interest can then be directed to a more comprehensive descriptive document of the priorities and incentives. Formats and guidelines for application could then be

issued as separate documents. Splitting the documentation makes it easier to download and customizes them to the levels of interest of prospective applicants.

The publication of detailed and precise guidelines for managing the program and executing the research showed dividends in terms of focusing responses to calls and hence easing the work of GMUs in the volumes of applications to handle and in checking for administrative compliance. Consistency of rules and transparency in the selection of projects will permit, through repeated interaction, the institutions of the region to appreciate the value of the CGS as a strong mechanism for directing programs. There are, however, some dissenting voices especially from those whose proposals were not selected about dominance by a few institutions and marginalization of the weak and poorly-resourced institutions.

Promoting NARS reform and re-directing technology development and transfer efforts

CGS is often, among other objectives, meant to provide a sound basis for positive change in the way that national institutions conduct research and also to provide the fund managers with an opportunity to mainstream some of the key institutional principles within participating organisations through the research that is commissioned. The guidelines for grant proposals are an important avenue to educate NARS institutions, including even those that eventually do not receive support, about the desirable qualities that make for successful organizations in the research competitive world. Private sector and civil society participants in particular pay fuller attention to reading proposal guidelines than they do to anything else, and guidelines that are well-structured can help them establish sound organizational practices. Consistency in guidelines leads applicants to gradually internalize the key points and learn to become more focused and strategic in their thinking.

To avoid inclusion of redundant partners on project teams, for all projects to be approved for commissioning, there should be a minimum requirement for an institution to be considered a partner for Contracting. The FIRCOP, for example, specified that roles and responsibilities on the project should account for at least 20% of the budget. Participating institutions should be required to provide evidence of ability to facilitate inclusion of required expertise from institutions other than those contracted. The lead institution apart, participation in the projects was dominated by national agricultural research institutes (NARIs) and agricultural universities on the core teams. This was not surprising as the bulk of research infrastructure (facilities and scientists) reside in these institutions. Restricted partnerships of this type may not be able to achieve the research objectives in the more market-led and development-oriented projects promoted through the CGS. Projects should be required and assessed on the ability to form country teams that ensure greater multi-stakeholder involvement, particularly through the participation of producer associations and the more non-traditional research partners in the innovation system. The extent to which this was adopted varied considerably across the teams. It was also apparent that projects which included the CGIAR centres and the more stable and better-resourced NARIs had a clearer vision and a tighter partnership structure than other projects. This reflected strong technical backstopping from the CGIAR centres and the good use made of their regional collaborative links. The participation of CGIAR centres should therefore be encouraged where the researchable issues are in line with their regional priorities.

Many projects were engaging in interesting participatory research with farmers at the local level. In order to fully capture the benefits from this research and scale out the outputs more widely there needed to be stronger links with national level farmer and private sector organisations. Some organisations, particularly from the private sector, may find it difficult to participate in research projects as full partners because of their very different ways of operation. However, the involvement of these organisations can still be obtained and this should be arranged during the early stages of the proposal development. During the design of the project they have an opportunity to help set the

agenda and therefore have a genuine stake in the research. In some cases, there was an evident tendency for core teams to view other stakeholders as *beneficiaries* rather than active participants with shared ownership of the research activities. This problem can be addressed by requiring project teams to hold stakeholder workshops after concept notes have been accepted to further agree on the focus and beneficiaries of the project and the roles and responsibilities of the partners on the team. This would help to ensure that projects are more demand-led and that the outputs will be more relevant to user needs.

Multi-disciplinarity

The majority of project teams were largely composed of bio-physical scientists with experience in production-oriented research. This posed a challenge to the adoption of IAR4D approaches in the research projects. The review should make the participation of persons with the necessary skills a requirement for the approval of full proposals. The GMUs should authorize full implementation after the inception phase only if the reviewers' concerns have been addressed. Some teams made considerable efforts to broaden the range of skills available within projects and sourced from many different organisations. Some did not seem to be that committed and this was largely associated with the poor development or non-existence of their project communication plans.

Research approaches

Much of the field research was still primarily geared towards production issues. Some of this research involved participatory methodologies in which technical options were demonstrated in field plots and farmers then voluntarily selected options which they tried out in subsequent seasons in their own fields. This type of trial proved to be a highly effective way of engaging farmers in joint experimentation with researchers and encouraged them to adapt promising technologies to their own conditions. The key to the success of such trials is to ensure that they are farmer-led and build on, rather than attempt to substitute for, local agronomic practices. This leads to a co-learning approach which can result in co-innovation and is generally much more effective than conventional researcher-led 'training' activities. However, many trials were researcher-led and the design often included certain technical options that did not fit the local farming system. Modifications to the treatments would make them more relevant and the experience gained would lead to joint learning by farmers and researchers.

It is important that the field work undertaken by regional project teams does not reproduce what is being done, or could equally well be done, by individual NARS. Where technical interventions have already been tested and promoted there is limited value in setting up new participatory trials. In many of these regional projects, the key issues are not technical but relate to how farmers make decisions about a variety of different potential technology and policy options. The impact of the research would be greater if, for example, the project teams made links with existing organized groups and programmes and helped develop a set of decision tools to help farmers to assess the likely outcomes of using different technologies in different ways. This methodology could then be made available to a large number of other uptake pathways and validated with the coordination of the project team and other regional networking mechanisms. Based on the outcomes, the decision tools could be refined and then promoted more widely in subsequent years. This type of approach is likely to be much more productive than establishing new researcher-led small-scale case studies and expecting extension agencies and NGOs to engage in the activities.

Despite the somewhat narrow focus of some of the research, the NARS showed openness to embracing the new competitive system and to try out new ways of working. Most of the projects were attempting to carry out 'research for development' and there was strong recognition of the

need to involve a wide range of stakeholders and a general willingness to reflect on the outcomes of project activities and to draw lessons from them. This will increase the chance that project teams will be able to identify best practices and validate them through action research. There is still some way to go in moving from a production-oriented approach towards the 'innovation platform' mode of working in which all the linkages in the resource-to-production-to-consumption chain are taken into account.

Communication

Communication problems – whether by letter, fax, e-mail, telephone or web-posting – are endemic in many countries. Low responses from some countries could be partly blamed on many of the potential applicants not even learning about the CGS or seeing the research calls. Reporting delays were also partly due to communication problems between lead institutions and participating partners. Visits to partner institutions, making direct contacts and producing detailed written documentation and guidelines proved helpful.

Financial provisions and reporting

The choice of lead institution on account of its ability to transfer funds across national borders made disbursement quite simple. However the decentralised spending across several partners created audit and financial management problems. The requirement for pooled accountability by the lead institution created major delays. In some cases, there were low average levels of project spending, partly caused by delays in start-up and reporting. Finance staff at some lead institutions could not adequately explain discrepancies in documentation sent by partners. The inadequacy of remuneration at some participating institutions, failure to provide top-up/incentive allowances to scientists, inadequate institutional overheads, no provision for significant capital expenditure and insistence on many partners (hence small sums of money to each partner) also created problems. Though not openly accepted, the CGS activities were often accorded low priority. There were also reported incidences of tensions – finance staff at institutions not adequately facilitating research teams because they felt they were not adequately “facilitated” unlike scientists who received allowances to go for field work. Special assistance may often be required for competing/cooperating institutions to establish the essential understanding of the prescribed budgeting, project management processes and technical/financial reporting procedures and processes.

CGS do not focus on Capacity Building

Typically, CGS provides only limited support for essential medium to long-term technology development and transfer programs, human capital development, new equipment and modernized infrastructure. The first step for re-aligning national research institutions to national development is to organize capacity development programs that create the optimal numbers and expertise mix that can promptly and appropriately respond to research demands. Reinforcing the capacity of national research institutions in the SADC region can also be fostered by supporting the development of well articulated co-operation between institutions on key subject matters, so that the countries unable to organize a critical mass of human resources and working means on those subjects will participate in productive research programs fitting their needs. This requires that those subject matters are agreed upon between the stakeholders and that mechanisms are put in place for organizing the cooperation. Whereas the CGS fosters the latter, it only operates well when the experts are available. When they are in scarcity, there can hardly be any meaningful competition. Capacity building requirements are often beyond a CGS, except for training and equipment linked to funded proposals, and is better undertaken as a separate undertaking.

Managing stakeholder expectations

During the preparatory stages of designing a regional CGS, often much time is lost⁷ and as a result, there is in the end immense pressure to get the system going, “spend” the money and “show impact” in part because committed donor money risks being lost. The ICART financing agreement, for example, was signed on 11 November 2003. As a result of the D+3 regulation governing the 9th EDF fund, contracts for the implementation of research and training actions within SADC had to be signed before 11 November 2006. The PCU of ICART was constituted in March 2006, giving it 8 months to finalize the process of grant contract award to consortia for them to be able to implement research and training projects over a maximum duration of 36 months. On the other hand, the criteria used to identify if proposals were relevant or not were the RISDP and the Dar es Salaam declaration. These needed to be further prioritized researchable topics. This had been planned through a situation analysis study which would take longer than the 8 months available.

Indeed stakeholder expectations in a CGS are immense and diverse, and managing these expectations is a big challenge. Consequently, the start of the program often needs to be rushed (as was the case with ICART-CRARF) and the initial timetable ambitious. Implementation had to start when some formats and guidelines for the program as a whole, and for individual projects, were still being developed. This meant that later-on the initial draft CGS guidelines needed to be extensively revised⁸. All these and capacity building requirements cost money and time, which often leads to a relatively high administrative cost in the initial years of CGS establishment. The cost is even greater if the time and energy expended by applicants and their institutions in preparing and submitting proposals is considered, given that over 90% of submissions are declined.

Managing conflicts of interest

The need to balance local ownership of the regional CGS with independence from ‘political’ interference evidently exhibited itself from the onset. Although CGS design ensured a clear distinction between the functions of: (i) policy setting; (ii) proposal evaluation; (iii) CGS management and administration; and, (iv) research project execution, there were strong sentiments about who was finally awarded contracts. Member state scientists and research managers openly expressed dissatisfaction about leadership of the projects being provided by institutions external to the region.

Regional CGS also need to be designed to benefit from a rational mixture of “competition” and “cooperation”. Although competition is basic to a successful CGS (the grants going to the best qualified and most efficient consortium), the CGS rules and procedures also explicitly demand partnerships, collaboration and networking. Especially in the early stages, there often is more competition (for funds) rather than cooperation (to achieve impact on the ground). Teams may develop CNs, largely through the personal initiative of principal investigators, without reference to the ongoing programs and/or existing collaborative networks. Sometimes many “partners” may have just been informed of the project idea and requested to obtain supporting letters from their institutions. There often is no conclusive indication of effective interactions amongst proposed partners. The challenge, therefore, is to establish a mandatory need and specific criteria for communication and reports that prove genuine cooperation.

⁷ The donors and designers want a “perfect” system.

⁸ The SADC-MAPP is undertaking this process.

Ensuring broad institutional and professional participation

As mentioned earlier, competitive processes consume a significant amount of resources for administration, and for participation (time and energy expended by applicants and their institutions in preparing and submitting proposals) relative to the chances of winning and grant funds awarded. There is no guarantee of continuation of funding after the initial grant period. Consequently and also because only a small proportion of submitted proposals are usually funded, an elaborate two-stage process is normally followed – the Concept Note stage and the Full Proposal stage.

The review process applies two levels of criteria - compliance with administrative criteria and scientific merit. Key criteria for eligibility include demonstrated qualifications, ability to facilitate and ensure active participation of diverse stakeholders, ability to maintain 'level playing field', ability to avoid being dominant but providing technical leadership and partnership facilitation, and proper constitution and legality. The CGS, through eligibility and merit-based criteria, serves as an important tool for mobilizing and focusing an existing available capacity on identified issues, ensuring scientific excellence and raising the level of preparation and implementation of research projects and fostering the development of institutional and organizational partnerships between public, private sector and civil society organizations.

Diversity and capacity that can lead to effective partnerships and true competition are essential ingredients of successful CGS. To ensure this principle is adhered to, it is important that eligibility to participate in regional CGS is widened. By focusing on regionality, the CGS fosters greater integration of research among the SADC countries. However, proposals are often largely a result of personal initiatives. Factors like shortage of researchers in some of the NARS components, few researchers and teams in some thematic areas, high fragmentation of research initiatives, high isolation of research teams, low mobility of researchers, low emphasis on and regard for, cooperation may lead to a lack of true collaboration among research teams and institutions. This requires a significant effort in building capacity of the participating NARS concurrently with CGS establishment. Particularly in the case of SADC where there evidently is a shortage of capacitated institutions or where it is desirable to entice institutions into new areas of work and/or into new (sometimes international) partnerships, it may be important for the GMU to:

- a) Bring potential partners together and/or provide for capacity building efforts in advance of the FP finalization.
- b) Pro-actively assist (sometimes with project preparation funding) to move from CN to FP.
- c) Provide capacity building and technical back-stopping during project implementation.
- d) Search out capable lead institutions and facilitate particular partnerships, especially when a diverse project portfolio is required, e.g. including livelihood improvement in marginal areas or for enhancing the gender balance, pro-actively.

Evaluation needs to put most emphasis on the technical quality of the proposal without too heavily relying on the academic qualifications of the members of the proposing team. In particular cases where dominance by outside (SADC) institutions is considered undesirable, the Call may also prescribe the lead institution coming from within the SADC countries. The research teams should also be encouraged to target professionals (not only scientists) in the agricultural (in the broad sense) field, including those not previously engaged in agricultural R&D.

Sustainability

While the ICART and FIRCOP undoubtedly met most of their objectives, the question of sustainability of the research enterprise under competitive funding remains a critical issue. To date the Development Partners have borne all the responsibility for providing the pot of money. As was illustrated with the cessation of CGS activity after full commitment of available donor funds, this heavy reliance on external funding and diminishing/ un-replenished funds can not guarantee long-term research effort. Strong member state support and contribution will be needed to ensure sustainability once donor contributions are exhausted. Project teams also need to realize that CGS grants do not guarantee follow-on support and need to pro-actively attempt to gain funding from other sources to continue their research after CGS funding. This was the case with some projects, which were able to demonstrate impact and benefits of their research outputs and thus attract additional funding from different sources.

Furthermore, strong projects and programs are usually the product of strong organizations. If grant makers neglect the overall health of the institutions they support, those grantees will fail to live up to their promise and their responsibility. Shying away from supporting a significant proportion of administrative expenses may prove to be counter productive. Ratios vary but the percentage of expenditures that goes to programs and which goes to administration and fundraising is often in the range of 70:30. To be effective in delivery of services, institutions generally have to spend money to figure out ways to use its resources effectively and to train, develop, and retain staff. Organizations that spend little on themselves and much on programs may please individual donors, but they may actually be less effective in delivering meaningful results and often lose the best of their staff to institutions offering better incentives.

Training and facilitating grant-proposal writers to help teams craft their applications provides help that is often better than what many institutions can develop in-house. Second, and more important, there is need to find ways to provide greater operating support for NARS institutions. Since the CGS and every donor would prefer to give to specific programs, it is naive to think that other contributors will embrace giving to general operations when they themselves will not. It is argued that these are catered for under the national budgets – but these are either always inadequate or lead to programmes supported by these incentives taking precedence. One way to help finance general operations while still enjoying the advantages of supporting specific programs is to include a generous contribution to general operations or overheads in every project grant. If an institution generally spends 70 per cent on services and 30 per cent on administration and fundraising, a project grant might follow the same percentages. The CRARF currently stipulates a maximum of 7% on overheads.

Finally, there is need to plan for sustainability of programs initiated with CGS funding. Grant makers everywhere often are troubled when programs that are started with their grants are disbanded soon after those grants end. Very few institutions are truly experienced in building long-term support for programs. They struggle to understand how to generate earned income or build endowments or find entrepreneurial ways to support programs for the long term. Given that the staff of most NARS institutions are made up largely of bio-physical scientists and key administrators—not people trained in building organizations—that outcome should not be surprising. To prevent the sudden demise of programs, the CGS may consider providing "exit grants" especially for packaging and scaling-up the most promising results. In a three-year project grant, a 10 or 15% addition for the specific purpose of enabling an institution to develop ways to build long-term support could be considered. That would enable the institution to continue to generate publicity for the programs and give them access to people who are trained in raising funds and building organizational capabilities. Few institutions have their own funds to spend on business-development efforts. Exit grants would help insure that long-term issues are being considered.

CONCLUSION

The CGS is viewed as a powerful mechanism for shaping the way agricultural research is conducted. Among the factors appearing as critical for success are: balancing open participation with quality, a good governance system which can manage multiple relationships and interests, financial stability, and well managed projects that generate knowledge products desired by stakeholders. In addition, a shared vision of problems and envisaged solutions, a demonstrated demand for proposed activities, adequate research management and service provision capacity, frequent communication, decision-making transparency, and institutional ownership are key. The main criticisms of the CGS in practice are:

- a) Slow approval cycles, reflecting both cumbersome procedures for peer review, and the lack of “hands on” management needed for efficient operation of a complex system.
- b) Peer-review may become too academic and not adequately assessing proposals for IAR4D.
- c) Regionality and partnership conditionalities may create “forced marriages” where there is little evidence of genuine partnership, leaving the lead institutions to do most of the work. In some cases the main period for genuine partnership is during proposal writing. Difficulties of communication, obtaining travel authorizations and insufficient travel budgets may limit collaboration in subsequent phases of the project. Numerous research partners add to the burden and complexity of reporting.
- d) Regionality and partnership conditions may also mean that research funds are split between numerous institutions, which means that allocations become small in relation to demands made on partners. This limits their impact and reduced partners’ incentives for timely reporting.
- e) CGS projects do not provide funding for capacity building - scholarships or longer-term capacity building. They are also neither substitute to other research funding mechanisms, but rather supplements. It has been suggested in literature that for institutions planning to set up CGS for agricultural research, these should form only up to a maximum of 40% of all available funding.
- f) Principle investigators may have limited authority over other members of regional projects. This may result in late reporting by members, which delays funding.

While it is important to heed expert caution that CGS are supplements and not substitutes to other research funding mechanisms, they are particularly useful tools for supporting creative, innovative and high quality coordinated research projects which promise results and outcomes that are demonstrably communicable to end-users and enhance communication between researchers and end-users. As a regional funding mechanism, a CGS ensures allocation of resources to clear priorities that add value to national programs; improve research relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and quality; ensure user-oriented approaches and/or promote new research agendas. It enhances efficiency of research by reducing research cost through award to the most efficient research service provider, while facilitating the accrual of benefits to stakeholders and promoting subsidiarity, transparency and accountability in the allocation and use of research funds and the execution of research. The CGS also serves to promote greater ownership, institutional pluralism, partnerships and institutional reform by prescribing how research should be done and facilitating cross-institutional, cross-national collaboration and involvement of a plurality of research service providers. The status of the national and collective regional capacity to provide funding, education, a

supportive legal environment, modern communications, participation of the private sector and donor support, enables the appropriate design of a competitive funding program.

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ANNEX 1: COMPETITIVE GRANTS SYSTEMS WORLDWIDE**Typical Design**

Almost all CGS are characterized by the following aspects.

Operational Manual: For most CGS, a detailed but flexible operational manual is prepared at the outset describing the operating procedures, criteria and guidelines for participation in the program.

Management Structure: Although there are some variations in CGS management structure, the underlying principles are the same. Normally, the program management team includes a CGS “Secretariat” or management unit with direct responsibility for implementation and administration of the CGP and handling overall procurement and accounting. The Secretariat is usually responsible for conducting an information campaign to publicize the program and the CGS guidelines; advertising and soliciting applications; screening applications for compliance with CGS criteria; organizing technical reviews; arranging workshops; and organizing monitoring, evaluations, and impact assessments. The technical review process is usually carried out by respected independent specialists in their concerned technical fields. The final selection and/or approval is normally carried out by an autonomous or semi-autonomous “Board” or Commission, consisting of widely-respected individuals with a broad range of expertise, often with several members from private or non-governmental backgrounds. The Board also has overall responsibility for oversight and for CGS policies and strategies.

Eligible Applicants: Many CGS were initially conceived to provide support to the development and reform of an agricultural research system. However, although research institutes and stations often constitute the primary grant recipients, there is an increasing emphasis on widening the eligible participants to include universities, public and private extension providers, non-governmental organizations, and parastatal or private companies, either as partners or as primary applicants. Grant proposals are also expected to have a significant element of on-farm technology adaptation, testing and dissemination; expected “impact” is an important selection criterion for grant approval.

Beneficiary Contribution: Cost-sharing such as “in-kind” contributions by those implementing the proposal for CGS grant funds, including if possible the beneficiaries of the outcomes, is frequently an important aspect of CGS. World Bank financing of CGS is often kept to a fairly modest level with an invitation for further funding by government, other bilateral donors and/or farmer organizations by the end of the project implementation period in order to improve the likelihood of the CGS being sustained.

Other Design Characteristics: To a large extent, the CGS are tailored to the capacity and circumstances of a specific country or region, including compatibility with the size of the research and extension system, the human and financial resources available, and the available sources of support. CGS have normally been introduced on a pilot basis to fund selected priority areas, and are then evaluated for effectiveness to guide expansion of the program and to refine procedures and institutional arrangements. Appropriate training programs on procedures for soliciting, preparing and evaluating sub-project proposals are included to make the process fully transparent and to widen participation. The criteria for selecting sub-project proposals are widely disseminated, with guidelines for M&E established early-on in the process.

Implementation Lessons

Based on the CGS implementation experiences gained worldwide, the following lessons have been learned.

Realistic Expectations: It takes time to effectively introduce and implement a CGS. Successful CGS usually need at least a year of preparation time to set up the institutional mechanisms, establish consensus on program objectives and priorities, design the management structure, and to prepare a program proposal with the required budgets. Eight more months are usually required for the first call for proposals and to complete the technical reviews and selection of grant winners from the first round. At least another two months are necessary for contract negotiations and making effective arrangements (e.g. setting up bank accounts) before the first disbursements can be made. No less than three rounds of proposals are generally needed before a CGS and its procedures are fully established. Expectations of CGS implementation progress and impact should be adjusted in accordance with these experiences.

Broad Commitment from Governments and Stakeholders: To be successful, a CGS needs the sustained support of all affected government ministries, departments, research and extension institutions, as well as other relevant donor, non-governmental and private entities. It is particularly important that the government demonstrates its commitment by confirming that it is ready to establish an independent administrative unit (GMU) and a transparent financial system that will allow the CGS to be managed in a way that prevents conflict of interest and political interference. In addition, program management staff must have access to senior officials in the agricultural sector to help secure counterpart funding as necessary and to have the flexibility needed to change program requirements and structures to address new problems and opportunities as they emerge.

Stakeholder Involvement in Priority-Setting: In accordance with its aim of addressing highest priority technology development and transfer, a CGS should specifically address the immediate needs of farmers and other stakeholders. Priority setting procedures for CGS should be designed to involve all stakeholders, particularly including farmers, extension service providers, agro-processors, and agricultural trade associations.

A Broad Base of Potential Participants (and Reviewers): Keen competition among many potential participants and/or institutions is essential to a successful CGS.

Clear Priorities and Efficient Program Management: Programs need to respond to the needs of clients and the requirements of funding agencies. A smooth and transparent administration is essential for timely funding and sustained confidence in a CGS.

Good Governance: A CGS is best located in an autonomous institution that does not itself bid on grants. The CGS Board or Commission should be high profile and pluralistic with strong private and non-governmental participation, and establish CGS priorities in line with national priorities while recognizing local needs. The selection of competent and committed initial members and especially of chair persons is particularly important; members should be selected on the basis of outstanding professional skills and experience, and personal reputation rather than on the organizations they represent.

Transparent Management Systems: A transparent management system showing how priorities are identified and how proposals are evaluated is also critical. Priorities and procedures should be publicized well in advance of invitations for proposals and not be subject to unexpected changes. The call for proposals needs to be precise, public and widely distributed, accessible to all potential applicants, and give sufficient time for quality proposals to be prepared. Clear statements on the size of the available grants, the nature of activities funded, and any special conditions need to be published simultaneously with the invitation for proposals. In addition, establishing an efficient system of awarding contracts to minimize potential conflicts of interest is important.

Competition: For CGS to work effectively, a substantial number of competitors are needed to assure a good supply of high-quality proposals. To retain the benefit of competition, the pool of potential applicants may be expanded to include a broad range of providers in addition to public research institutes and university faculties, including private entities, NGOs, and public and private extension services.

Start Small: Despite substantial worldwide experience, establishing CGS remains largely “learning by doing.” A CGS will be able to operate at full capacity only after a few rounds of proposals. Thus, the approval rate should be low for the first rounds to ensure rigor and to allow the program to build experience.

Grant Amount: It is important to establish a ceiling on awards to a single institution in order to prevent “domination.” The average size of award and the probability of success in achieving funding must be such that top quality specialists are encouraged to submit proposals. However, the risks involved in possible failure of inappropriately large grants also needs to be taken into account. For the applicants, the expected return on the costs of preparing a proposal must be adequate and the integrity of the review process must reduce the risk and uncertainty involved. In addition, the transaction budgets of the program must be realistic in terms of administration and review costs and in the costs to applicants of preparing proposals.

Review Quality: Rigorous and transparent review procedures must be implemented from the start for the evaluation and selection process. The screening process should be based on an established set of well-known criteria and must be objective, professional, anonymous, and be made subject to external evaluation. A sound sub-project proposal evaluation system, based on merit, should include at least the following criteria: technical quality, institutional capacity, expected socio-economic returns (including efficiency and equity considerations), and environmental impact.

Operational Manual: The CGS should include a detailed manual containing procedures for preparing and soliciting applications; eligibility criteria; screening, review, evaluation and selection criteria and procedures; contracting, disbursement, procurement and reporting practices; and M&E guidelines.

Training Programs: In order to ensure good quality proposals that address high priority farmer problems, resources need to be invested up-front in capacity-building for: applicants and service providers; GMU staff and Board or Commission members; and for technical reviewers. For example, training may be provided in on-farm constraints analysis and problem definition, proposal preparation, review criteria, proposal evaluation, project management, M&E and other problems identified during implementation.

Financial management and procurement: A smooth flow of funds and proper accountability demand efficient and effective fiduciary procedures, including financial management, procurement and audit.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Continuous M&E is important not only to track progress and impacts of grants but also to evaluate the achievements in reaching the overall development objectives of the CGS; a well-defined and organized M&E system and MIS are therefore of critical importance.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths and weaknesses of CGS may be categorized based also on a review of recent experience worldwide; the findings are summarized below.

Strengths: Major strengths of well-functioning CGS include the following:

- a) Greater transparency in priority setting and grant awards.
- b) More dependable and timely funding for technology development and transfer projects financed through CGS grants.
- c) Improved quality of proposals through competitive review and expert feedback.
- d) Increased effectiveness in technology development and dissemination by directing resources on the basis of merit.
- e) Increased efficiency through cost reductions, eliminating duplication, increasing accountability of resource use and enhancing utilization of infrastructure by providing more adequate and reliable operating resources.
- f) Closer alignment of agricultural R&D with national and regional research priorities and local demands for new technology and information.
- g) Promotion of a demand-driven national-level system and greater stakeholder involvement.
- h) Strengthened linkages between research and extension organizations and farmers.
- i) Opportunities to induce institutional change in the national AKIS.

Weaknesses: Main weaknesses are:

- a) The CGS system provides only limited support for essential medium to long-term technology development and transfer programs, human capital development, new equipment and modernized infrastructure.
- b) Continued funding uncertainty for the research and extension system as a whole.
- c) Time required for applying, revising and reporting in relation to CGS-funded projects reduces time available for actual research.
- d) Low sustainability of funding when the national or regional constituency is weak and external funding sources dry up.
- e) There are sometimes too few potential providers to create a competitive market.

Challenges

Ongoing CGS implementation experience also shows that there are several remaining challenges which need to be addressed; these are summarized below and in Table 1.

Local ownership versus political independence: It is important to simultaneously protect CGS from political interference and to develop political ownership to ensure sustainability. CGS management must accept that governments and donors are accountable for funds used and therefore need to ensure the productive and efficient use of CGS funds to address agreed priorities but governments must understand that the selection of grant winners is a purely technical decision. There has to be a distinction between the functions of policy, proposal evaluation, secretariat and administration, and research execution.

Government Policy: A major challenge is to mainstream the CGS concept and methodology into national research and extension programs and to integrate them into government policies, strategies and funding. This is a pre-requisite for sustainability. Domination and lack of coordination among donors can make it difficult to integrate the programs with nationally/regionally identified strategies.

Balancing CGS and core funding: Experience in World Bank-supported projects and worldwide suggests that CGS should be complementary rather than the main means to fund agricultural research and extension activities. Many core activities require long-term support which is difficult to provide through CGS. The "small country/system" problem in the availability of human and financial resources needed to support a CGS, and a difficulty in ensuring objective review to proposals must be considered. In addition, developing a relevant and balanced program to capture spillover from a coherent and synergistic portfolio of projects is necessary. Entirely demand-driven approaches characteristic of CGS can result in a fragmented portfolio, while on the other hand, emerging systems with diverse institutional capability could put a high level of stress on the weaker institutes to perform.

Farmer versus national priorities: Farmers tend to focus on technology with a short-term pay-off rather than longer-term research with delayed impact such as pollution control and natural resources management. Accordingly, a demand-driven approach reflecting farmer priorities may provide immediate returns to beneficiaries. However, there is also justification for setting some CGS priorities based on national concerns and strategic objectives, although longer-term topics would typically be addressed using core funding.

Cost Effectiveness: CGS overhead costs in WB-assisted projects vary widely from about 3 to 20 % of total budgets with an average of 5%. Such substantial costs are often partly a result of high start-up costs and salaries of additional staff appointed to manage the CGS. Care should be taken in project design and implementation to minimize these costs. M&E is also costly and can be reduced by taking sub-samples of CGS grants for impact assessment.

Sustainability: Continuous effort is required over many years to achieve operational integrity, to develop an institutional home for the CGS, and to ensure sustained independent financial support.

Balancing public and private objectives: protecting proprietary knowledge and technologies to attract the participation of the private sector, while ensuring that public funds are used for social objectives; and equity concerns: participation in provision or sharing of benefits?

CGS Impact

CGS are being implemented across the world, including in several SSA countries either as freestanding projects or as components of WB-financed projects. A review of these projects clearly demonstrates that CGS have had a strong positive impact and have helped implementing countries to address priority issues in the agricultural sector. Although a complete impact evaluation of CGP-funded sub-projects in these countries remains to be organized, available evidence from project supervision reports concerning ongoing projects and implementation completion reports clearly demonstrates that the great majority of these grant-funded projects have resulted in new technologies and/or widespread dissemination and adoption.

Some important sector-wide impacts may be summarized as follows:

- a) A number of agricultural services projects that include CGS have resulted in significant strengthening of the institutional base in the national agricultural sector.
- b) There has been considerable reinforcement of the legislative structure in support of privatized agriculture, land tenure, and food security and safety.
- c) Some countries have initiated their own self-financed competitive grant programs for agricultural services, although funding them adequately remains problematic.
- d) There has been an increased involvement by different stakeholders including farmer groups and associations in influencing agricultural services priorities and activities.
- e) In addition to strengthening agricultural research, considerable progress is being made in revitalizing agricultural advisory services partly through an increase in client control of R&D and responsiveness.
- f) Introduction of CGS has caused key decision-makers in some countries to re-examine the effectiveness and adequacy of their national agricultural services and to develop long-term national visions and strategies for their AKIS.
- g) CGS operations in some countries have helped to induce preparation of action programs for broader AKIS reform.

An Unfinished Agenda

In addition to the positive achievements of CGS, there exists a substantial need for further effort; some areas of concern are:

- a) The image of some CGS continues to suffer from weak sub-project administration and a perceived lack of transparency; more effective communications are essential to ensure continued public support and to improve chances for sustainability.
- b) Difficulties and inadequacies in sub-project management by grant winners; this should be addressed by repeated updating and improving operational manuals and continued and intensified training programs.
- c) Unnecessary bureaucracy frequently remains a problem in sub-project implementation and the crucial importance of timely funding requires continued effort.
- d) Delays in receiving national counterpart funding represents an important reason for a lack of timely sub-project implementation in some cases.

- e) Especially when CGS sub-project budgets are relatively large, greater effort in screening proposals and in technical and financial monitoring is needed.
- f) Once CGS-funded sub-projects are being completed, continued weaknesses in M&E and especially impact assessment threatens to undermine the CGS image and chances for sustainability; thus there is a need for follow-up evaluations
- g) Greater effort is required in several countries to put in place better methods for technology dissemination and up-scaling of improved practices.
- h) Although a start has been made in some countries, there is a need for continued reforms in the NARS to enhance efficiency and responsiveness.

Thus, notwithstanding the record of implementation experience with CGS showing overwhelming evidence that agricultural services and/or sector projects involving CGS have had a positive impact on the pace of adaptation and institutional reform of the agricultural sectors in response to regional and global changes, it must be concluded that there is a major unfinished agenda, specifically:

- a) key stakeholders from within and from outside of the agricultural sectors of the concerned countries have expressed a strong desire to ensure the sustainability and deepening of the reform efforts; and,
- b) it has become clear that in many countries, the ongoing projects should be considered a “first-phase” with significant requirements and potentials for follow-up programs.

In summary, CGS have demonstrated their value and efficacy as stepping stones to overall agricultural reforms and rural development. These conclusions make a strong case for ensuring the continued implementation of CGS even after World Bank funding has ended in order to fully reap the potential benefits. High quality, independent impact assessment is particularly essential to generate support for continuation of activities. Overall, three major steps are crucial to sustain CGS in the future:

- a) undertake a detailed analysis/evaluation of the impacts, results and achievements of ongoing or completed CGS and the individual sub-projects;
- b) clearly define the net benefits from the CGS and the individual sub-projects funded through grants; and,
- c) widely disseminate the results of the evaluation to encourage governments, donors, private sector entities and beneficiaries to buy into CGS and ensure continued financial and institutional support.

Table 1: CGS Challenges and strategies

Underlying issues	Desired achievements	Strategies	Success/Failure factors	Guiding principles
<p>Challenge 1: Suitability of CGS (capacities, relevance of supported programs)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CGS not the only and necessarily appropriate funding mechanism in all situations stage of development (of the research system - #, capacities) and economic environment Developing a relevant and balanced program balancing innovative and traditional approaches - risky projects and unknown providers balancing public and private objectives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> protecting proprietary knowledge and technologies to attract the participation of the private sector, while ensuring that public funds are used for social objectives. equity concerns: participation in provision or sharing of benefits? Sustainability of funding and institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure efficient use of resources while allowing equitable opportunities Address priorities that reflect agreed policies and strategies, and demands from beneficiaries. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> link with other funding sources in complementary funding system. Direct funding Find an appropriate mix (and roles) of institutional and competitive funding provision for follow up projects to enable scaling-up or further development of promising technologies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alienation of weaker partners May lead to a disjointed research portfolio lacking coherence and synergy 	
<p>Challenge 2: Procedures (processes, guidelines, formats) for positive impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cost effectiveness of procedures: balance overhead (cost of investment in preparing proposals) against the need to ensure accountability and transparency (details, flexibility) Detail of guidelines with respect to the process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear guidelines that ensure pro-active development and transparent review of proposals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Flexible; review and revise continuously Bring out contentious issues upfront (eligibility, funding levels and likely # to support....) Pro-active development of proposals through the development of networks and providing training for weaker institutes, including collaborative multi-institutional activities. Use of a pre-proposal stage that allows the program to work with authors of selected pre-proposals to develop solid proposals that are 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rigidity stifling innovation and creativity Mismatch between call formats and evaluation criteria 	

Table 1: CGS Challenges and strategies

Underlying issues	Desired achievements	Strategies	Success/Failure factors	Guiding principles
Challenge 3: Policy and administration				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> balancing local ownership with independence from interference - distinction between the functions of policy, proposal evaluation, secretariat and administration, and research execution. ensuring objective review to proposals. Cost of establishment – investment upfront to fit institutional environ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fairness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> strong and independent governance is essential. piloting and scaling up as experience is gained and internalized - track progress. rigorous, independent, and transparent review process. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflict of interest Qualification, integrity and impartiality of reviewers 	
Challenge 4: Capacity to participate				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> CGS don't create but thrive on existing capacity competency and performance of stakeholders. public and private sector perceptions of each other - building trust. Diverse capacities - stress on weaker institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity building for NARS and traditionally non-research institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training (allocate resource separately?) ceilings on awards to individual organizations to avoid dominance. using experiences from CGS to upgrade quality of core/ring-fenced funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Usual culprits 	
Challenge 5: Partnerships				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Co-operation, competition, cooperation - personal to institutional Domination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pluralism, diversity Contribution and not merely share of budget Local ownership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identify and involve the various components of the stakeholder constituency early in the planning stage, and ensure that collaboration is mutually beneficial. Flexibility of teams to procure/involve additional expertise 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rivalry, concealing of information Pushing for own (donor) agenda 	

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