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**Subject ISNAR's 4<sup>th</sup> EPMR**

Dear Ian,

We are writing to you in preparation for CGIAR AGM02, where ISNAR's 4<sup>th</sup> External Program and Management Review is on the agenda. We hope our comments will help you to plan the discussions on this agenda item. The ISNAR EPMR has raised a more fundamental point on the extent to which the CGIAR is willing and able to assist national agricultural research institutions in developing countries to strengthen research management, to create effective innovation systems and to forge new inter-institutional linkages. The consensus from the interim Science Council and the Executive Council was that the CGIAR has such an obligation, and that this is not met by alternative suppliers outside the system. ISNAR has been a prime tool for the CGIAR to meet these developing country expectations.

You may be aware that the EPMR Panel raised some critical issues on the quality of ISNAR's work, the impact of its activities in developing countries, and the organization and oversight of its work. ISNAR has endorsed some of the findings of the EPMR Panel whilst differing on others. The interim Science Council supported ISNAR's view on some of the Panel recommendations whilst the response from the Executive Council was more mixed. It may be useful for you as CGIAR Chair to receive the outline of a likely ISNAR response at AGM02, to guide the subsequent discussion.

In line with the iSC recommendations ISNAR agrees that ISNAR should be characterized by the following features:

- a center of excellence in agricultural research policy, organization and management;
- producing research and services of high quality with demonstrated impacts; this will enhance its credibility in the eyes of both donors and stakeholders;
- focusing its activities on IPGs and services thus contributing to the mandate of the CGIAR;
- aware of and responsive to key changes in its external environment;
- clear understanding of its comparative advantage and appropriate niche within the research – service continuum of the agricultural research arena;
- decentralized and primarily focused in Africa where CGIAR support in institution strengthening is needed the most.

Over the last 5.5 years (the review period of ISNAR's 4<sup>th</sup> EPMR), ISNAR has made major efforts to adapt its research and service agenda to the new realities facing national agricultural research

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institutions and their umbrella organizations. At the same time it has acted to resolve the skewed gender and diversity balances among ISNAR's human resources to ensure a wider experience base and skill mix, and to adjust activities and staff complement to the reduced funding envelope of the CGIAR, including ISNAR. Part of ISNAR's adaptation has involved being present with offices on all three developing continents, including a major unit with the regional agricultural development organization based in Costa Rica.

The 4<sup>th</sup> EPMR endorsed the strategic outlines of its new Road Map, effective from the beginning of 2002, and its achievements in linking research and stakeholders, its achievements in training and in biotechnology. This EPMR was however critical of the impact of other aspects of ISNAR's work. It urged ISNAR to reconsider its institutional structure, particularly aiming for increased quality of research and service products. It considered that ISNAR, in addition to its prime focus of serving national agricultural research institutions, should also have even closer cooperation with regional, sub-regional and national agricultural research institutions, possibly even transferring tasks to these institutions in the medium future (5 years). There is a general appreciation that the reforms required at national, sub-regional and regional level to support poverty alleviation and food security, are much more difficult to achieve than the centralization agendas of the 1980s and 1990s suggested. There is a far broader set of actors; by their participation in change and their level of organization they are playing an increasingly important role in regional and sub-regional corporations. ISNAR developed its new Road Map to respond to these changes.

Recent international meetings (World Food Summit five years later, World Summit on Sustainable Development) have reconfirmed the need for modern, functional institutions to support rural development. There is now a request from the EPMR for ISNAR to demonstrate that it can move faster, produce more and higher quality international public goods yet be able to respond nimbly to actual daily needs of national agricultural research institutions. Whilst there may be suppliers of services that can assist in individual cases, there is a strong global need for international public goods that can only be produced by international public centers.

ISNAR's Board and Management have considered what they believe to be some valuable suggestions by the EPMR Panel, reinforced by commentary from the iSC and ExCo. In particular ISNAR wishes to respond to the suggestions that more and better research-based services can probably be delivered by a more network-based organization. ISNAR has considerable experience both in decentralizing its efforts and in facilitating major and successful networks.

ISNAR accepts the offer of a restructuring team to assist its Board and Management in a further transformation of the institution that may meet the demonstrated needs of stakeholders. An early event must be to ensure wide stakeholder and shareholder participation.

ISNAR believes that international public goods involving exchange of knowledge on institutional innovation from one region or setting to another cannot be achieved without a significant central hub. In order to retain a significant research generation and to coordinate research work with alliance partners a decentralized ISNAR must therefore retain a central hub of significant scientific strength (headquarters) either continuing in The Hague, where it has excellent logistic and host country arrangements, or relocating to a suitable and supportive developing country site. The mix of staff skills and competencies would be matched with the necessary changed terms of reference. As it becomes clear what national, sub-regional and regional requirements are needed for increased ISNAR presence, ISNAR would establish a small number of network offices closely linked to regional and sub-regional organizations. When locating such offices ISNAR plans to ensure that the broader CGIAR mandate relating to agriculture, forestry and fisheries, including food security and management of natural

resources and the CGIAR partners in government institutions, civil society, universities and private industry can all be well reflected in the positioning of the network offices. ISNAR plans to strengthen its ties to sub-regional and other regional institutions dealing with topics associated with agriculture and rural poverty alleviation.

With this decentralized model ISNAR expects to deliver both on the future expectations of CGIAR shareholders and stakeholders, as well as on the on-going commitments, some of which are long-term in nature.

ISNAR's governance structure would be modified to ensure significant sub-regional presence in addition to specific expertise required to ensure science quality.

ISNAR's new Road Map would be strengthened to ensure significant activities of regional and sub-regional nature, in support of national requirements and efforts. The networks will build on experience gathered by ISNAR itself, and by other productive networks operated by IARCs, sub-regional organizations, civil society organizations, GFAR and FAO. ISNAR believes that such a transformation, if supported by ISNAR's stakeholders and donors, can be undertaken over a 2-3 year period. It will lead to a smaller headquarters suitably located and a series of network offices tailored to meet sub-regional and regional needs and better serve national agricultural research institutions.

Such efforts cannot be successful if the CGIAR puts a ceiling on the amount of funding ISNAR can receive from interested donors, as suggested by the Executive Council. A ceiling will be particularly disruptive as ISNAR has in the pipeline very significant funding prospects, some arising from competitive grants and some with sub-regional organizations, and work counter to the efforts of decentralizing ISNAR. Strong donor support at this stage will just enable ISNAR to move quickly and decisively to implement agreed actions.

The current timelines for the appointment of a new Director General are such that they will allow changes to proceed as above. ISNAR has informed prospective candidates that the institution is likely to undergo significant changes. With the expected expedient action of a restructuring team there will be no disruption of the normal selection procedure.

With kind regards,

Moïse C. Mensah  
Chair, ISNAR Board of Trustees

Stein W. Bie  
Director General