

Embracing change within the CGIAR

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Dr. Monty Jones, who developed New Rice for Africa, NERICA, received an honorary degree at UGent, from the hands of Prof. dr. ir. Patrick Van Damme. We are glad to be able to bring his work to the fore, and inform you about some recent developments.

Monty Jones is executive director of the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA). As a scientist who has worked within the international agricultural research system of the CGIAR, and who now heads the umbrella organisation for agricultural research in Africa, he provides his viewpoints on the ongoing reform process within the Consultative Group of International Agricultural Research to form a new consortium by 2010.

It is not easy to change, but I believe that change within the CGIAR is long overdue. We have to be able to address current challenges and ensure that the system is made more efficient and effective in delivering impact where it is most needed.

For over two decades, we have had various initiatives that were aimed at creating change within the system. Today, and with the benefit of hindsight, we know that in many cases, the approaches used have not worked very well because they were deficient in one way or too top-down in their approach. The system-wide initiatives, for example, which aimed at strengthening collaboration with partners, failed because the majority of our national programmes are too weak. In my opinion, what we need is a bottom-up approach that includes the voice of the NARS (National Agricultural Research Systems) and helps to strengthen them.

Engaging with partners

So I feel that change is necessary. However, from what I have seen so far, the ongoing change-management process of the CGIAR is a serious one. For example, the Alliance is looking at ways of achieving real integration with national systems, recognising that the contribution of the CGIAR is only a small fraction of the agricultural research conducted worldwide, perhaps less than five per cent. Better engagement between CG centres and national partners is certainly what we at FARA would like to see.

We are hopeful that this can be achieved, not in the least because there has been much wider consultation this time than on previous occasions. Following the first draft of the change-management document, for example, FARA took the lead getting the views of African constituents, through a conference and an online survey. These views and concerns have now been forwarded to the CG. Such consultation is essential, so that key priorities for Africa are identified and defined. It is important, for example, that the CG is not just about cutting-edge science, but that the developmental aspect is also considered.

A question of priorities

But one cannot expect the CG to do everything. When talking with institutions in Asia, Latin America and elsewhere, you notice that specific priorities vary from one region to another. However, there are issues that are common to several regions which can be addressed. For Africa, FARA believes that efforts should be linked to the Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) process. This is a programme that has been endorsed by our Heads of State and provides a vision for all African countries to achieve greater agricultural development by 2015.

Through the CAADP process, we already have our priorities defined and our shopping list is very long. We would like to see the CG align itself to key areas where it can add value to our work in the development, dissemination and uptake of agricultural research technologies. The CGIAR Alliance aims to create mega-programmes. As you know, our environment is a complex one with several problems, many of which are major. In many places in Africa, I think the issue of integrated natural resource management is very important. Significant areas of our crops and pasturelands are already degraded and we desperately need to replenish our soils to support sustainable agricultural production.

Doing things differently

But agricultural research needs to find a new way of doing things and at FARA, we would advocate taking an innovation systems approach, which would include researchers, the private sector, NGOs and others, all working as partners in a more systematic way. Everyone needs to be brought on board to look at issues across the value chain. If we go only one quarter of the way in achieving this, it will make a big difference.

Africa will give the CG Alliance all the support it needs. We have to realise our dream, and that is to increase agricultural production by six per cent by 2020. We do not have much time. But I think, with seriousness on all sides, we should begin to see some light at the end of the tunnel and I think the new-look CGIAR Alliance can help us achieve that.