

IFAR: An External Evaluation

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Executive Summary

During its fifth meeting, held in December 2004, the board of directors of IFAR decided to commission an external review of the organization. It was also decided that the review should address the following four elements:

- Serving mission: fairness and transparency of decisions; effectiveness and efficiency of operations
- Stewardship of financial resources: financial management and accountability
- Legal status: appropriateness of 501(c)(3) status to IFAR mission and operations
- Programmatic expansion: suggestion of new activities that could be launched by IFAR while maintaining full alignment to mission

The review was carried out between August and October 2005. The main sources of information were as follows:

- In-person and telephone interviews with the chair of the IFAR board and other board members
- Board minutes and other management documentation
- Questionnaires sent to all applicants, center Directors General and selection panel members

The review found that IFAR is, after the revitalization process, a focused and well-managed institution. The Small Grants Program, IFAR's main activity, is very much appreciated by the people who have participated in the program. The responses to the questionnaires, however, raise a number of issues regarding the implementation of the program and include several recommendations.

The review specifically addressed the issue of the governance model. The present integration of the board and its relationship with the CGIAR are, in general, appropriate. Some small changes are recommended, however.

In the opinion of the consulted lawyer, the legal structure of the organization is appropriate. In addition, the financial management seems to be efficient. To ensure and maintain accountability, the board's decision to have an external audit is strongly endorsed.

The main conclusions and recommendations are as follows:

The Small Grants Program is consistent with IFAR objectives: the program contributes to capacity development of young scientists and helps centers integrate and serve their partners in the developing world. The selection process has followed the board's additional objective of concentrating on Africa and South Asia.

Although small, the program has efficiently used available resources and could be usefully expanded if more resources became available. Given the amount of resources available, no immediate need exists to generate new major programs or activities.

In addition to the Small Grants Program, IFAR provides the funding for the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) awards granted every year and

the King Baoudouin awards granted every two years. This role implies additional fiduciary responsibilities for IFAR board members. It is therefore suggested that this activity be considered an integral part of IFAR activities and be reported on and audited as such.

IFAR should analyze the possible reasons for the drop in the number of Small Grants Program applicants between 2004 and 2005.

A remarkable theme of the questionnaire responses is respondents' satisfaction with the CGIAR centers with regard to personal and professional support, technical ability to fulfill respondents' research goals, and general environment. Also there is absolute coincidence to remark the benefits obtained with the grant, in terms of technical and professional improvements. This conclusion includes the W. Thalwitz award.

However, a number of observations related to program management need further analysis:

- Several candidates indicated that they did not receive clear instructions on preparing their application. A revision of the forms and procedures might be desirable, including making the announcement earlier in the year to give more time to centers and applicants.
- Similarly, grant recipients are required to submit a final technical report to the center that hosted them. Centers must implement procedures to ensure that the reports are submitted in a timely manner.
- Applicants should receive a letter indicating the result of the selection process.
- Additional support to prepare the proposals is requested, particularly in "francophone countries that have a language barrier. . . . so as to give equal chances to all applicants." Another comment was that "Poor countries should have more opportunities, as well as more information and instructions, because they lack access to modern sources of information."
- A number of award recipients felt that the funds awarded can support only a 6-month project, which is regarded as too short, a view shared by most DGs. Projects involving crops that have long growing periods should be considered for extra funds.
- Some award recipients and a few DGs suggested that equipment should be transferred to the grantee's institution at the end of the project.

The Small Grants Program is focused and useful. The following additional elements, however, could increase its impact on capacity mobilization:

- A greater focus on new themes that will have a wide impact on the research capacity of developing countries, such as biotechnology and science policy
- The organization of policy dialogue meetings to discuss cutting-edge scientific themes being worked on in the centers and science policy themes that are central to fostering capacity for research and innovation in the developing world.
- Favoring candidates who present research projects that are an integral part of a thesis in a degree-granting institution

It is recommended that every effort be made to obtain additional resources from CGIAR donors and others in order to substantially expand the program and thus create a more structured program with a greater variety of offerings and possibilities.

IFAR has been recognized as a nonprofit organization under article 501(c)(3) of the U.S. tax code. Consultations with IFAR's legal adviser indicated that this is the most appropriate legal structure and that no better option exists within the U.S. legal system.

The policy is to invest IFAR endowment in alternatives with the lowest possible risk. Consequently, all funds have been invested in U.S. Treasury obligations. This policy and its implementation seem to be the most appropriate approach, given the special characteristics of the reserves.

Because IFAR receives contributions in addition to the interest derived from the endowment, an external audit is necessary and convenient for transparency purposes and should be implemented as soon as possible. The question of the high cost of an external audit in relation to the size of IFAR's operating budget should be carefully examined.

IFAR is a small organization with a small and relatively simple program of activities. It would seem that a board of five members is of sufficient size. The present composition should be maintained consolidating the present situation were one board member is a retired DG or deputy DG, while the additional fifth member should be an independent person familiar with the CG. To preserve the independence of these two board members (in fact and in appearance), it is suggested that the names of the members be consulted on a no-objection basis, with the chair of board chairs and the chair of the ExCo committee respectively.

The overlap between the position of director of the CGIAR and that of the chair of the board has advantages and disadvantages and is a sensitive issue. The main apparent disadvantage is that the board loses independence from the CGIAR and the World Bank. That independence does not really exist, however. IFAR is a creation of the CGIAR and is an integral part of the activities developed by the CGIAR system. Given these close structural relationships, the overlap of functions facilitates IFAR's management and the fulfillment of its objectives. The present bylaws should be modified to establish this overlap.

The fact that IFAR was created to contribute to CGIAR activities and objectives implies that the IFAR board must be informed about the CGIAR objectives and organize its activities incorporating CGIAR's objectives as its own. The participation of the director of the CGIAR and the lead financial officer on the board is an effective way of doing so. Additionally, informal consultations with the CGIAR chair and other members of the CGIAR seem to be appropriate and necessary.

The information available suggests that the current operating model has worked reasonably well and has been effective. However, responsibility for evaluating applications has rested heavily on the shoulders of the two review panel chairs. Some panel members did not participate as actively and timely as expected; that pattern should be corrected.

One way to improve the participation of panel members is to foster a greater sense of ownership of and commitment to IFAR activities along with increased personal interaction between panel members and the board. It would be difficult and expensive to have the selection panels meet in person to do their work. One possible way to resolve

this difficulty is to select panel members (except for the chairs) who live in the Washington, DC, area.