



*GFAR – DURAS ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION ON COMPETITIVE GRANTS
03 December 2005
Palais des Congrès, Marrakech (Morocco)*

HIGHLIGHTS OF DISCUSSION

I. Background

A now commonly used mechanism for funding agricultural research is the Competitive Grants Scheme (CGS). This tool, which has become increasingly popular since the early 1990s, has been used to develop, ensure and sustain scientific capacity and to allocate resources to the most important scientific (and development) issues. While a number of such CGS have emerged over the years, the long gestation nature of agricultural and related research makes it difficult to draw conclusions about its efficiency and effectiveness for improving research relevance, effects on national capacity building, and sustainability of research infrastructure (Bie and Elliott, 2005).

It would be useful to learn of the emerging outcomes, if not impacts, of the various CGS currently being implemented as these would provide useful insights in the design and implementation of future CGS.

Following the suggestions made by participants to the FARA General Assembly Pre-Plenary Session on "Lessons Learned in the ASARECA Competitive Grants" held in June 2005 in Entebbe, Uganda, the Global Forum on Agricultural Research (GFAR), through its Project DURAS (Promotion of Sustainable Development in Agricultural Research System in the South), organized an electronic discussion on Competitive Grants. The Roundtable Discussion was then organized as a follow-up to the electronic debate.

II. Objectives

The Roundtable Discussion focused on the role CGS as a tool for leveraging partnerships as well as for building scientific and institutional capacities. Discussion focused on the following issues:

- How are research focus of CGS determined, and do they always respond to stakeholder priorities?
- What types of accompanying measures can be put in place to ensure that CGS funds reach the groups that need funding the most?
- How effective are CGS in achieving a balance between ensuring adequate capacities to do research (supply side) and mobilizing that capacity in the desired directions (demand side)?
- Given the usual short duration of CGS is there any evidence of impact on national research capacities, and how can this be measured?
- Is the CGS an appropriate tool for promoting partnerships, and would such partnerships be long lasting and sustainable?

III. Roundtable Discussants

GFAR Chair Mohammad Roozitalab opened the Roundtable Discussion with GFAR Executive Secretary Dr. Ola Smith presenting the RT objectives. The speakers, coming from donor community, CGS grants managers of CGS at various levels (programme, regional and sub-regional), and CGS grants recipient, were the following:

- Donor Perspective: Dr. Bahiru Duguma, Senior Agriculture Advisor
United States Agency for International Development

- Programme-level CGS: Dr. Carmen de Vicente, Subprogram Leader
Capacity building and enabling delivery, Generation Challenge Programme (GCP)
- Regional level CGS: Dr. Nicolas Mateo, FONTAGRO Executive Secretary
(Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Fund for Agricultural Technology)
- Sub-regional level CGS: Dr. Clesensio Tizikara, ASARECA CGS Manager
(Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa)
- CGS Recipient Perspective: Dr. Merida Roets
Collaborator of DURAS-supported project

DURAS Project Coordinator Oliver Oliveros presented the highlights of the electronic discussion and facilitated the ensuing discussion.

IV. Discussion Highlights

Highlights of the discussion are structured according to the five guide questions presented in the previous page.

How are research focus of CGS determined? Do they always respond to stakeholder priorities?

1. Research focus are usually determined through priority setting exercises involving key stakeholders. Participants to such activities are largely determined by the nature of and level in which CGS are to be implemented. For example, in a programme-wide CGS such as the Generation Challenge Programme (GCP) where the research agenda is highly focused, scientists from the consortium-member organizations decide on the research issues but is complemented by the advice and analysis provided by the GCP Stakeholder Committee as well as the CGIARS's Medium-Term Plan (MTP). In the case of FONTAGRO and ASARECA, research agenda is determined by their member countries and in consultation with their stakeholders/partners. Analysis of resource surveys and poverty maps are also employed in determining research agenda.
2. Participants mentioned that whatever the research focus of any CGS may be, it is important that these be made clear from the outset so that prospective grant applicants are able to focus their research proposals in accordance to the expectations of donors and institutions implementing the CGS. In addition, the need to ensure research and product delivery was highlighted during the discussion. Research projects should clearly elaborate research uptake.

How effective are CGS in achieving a balance between ensuring adequate capacities to do research (supply side) and mobilizing that capacity in the desired directions (demand side)?

3. CGS targets diversity and capacity that can lead to effective partnerships, coalitions and true competition. More and more, participation in CGS-funded research is widened to include not only researchers in research organizations and universities but also non traditional actors such as NGOs, agribusiness and private sector. While from the outset it seems that there is a rich mix of stakeholder involved, projects under CGS are often largely a result of personal initiatives and contacts. There is a need to move towards a more institutionalized approach in doing research.
4. Also, several 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, and low emphasis on cooperation may lead to lack of true cooperation among research teams and institutions.
5. While there could be appropriate mechanisms, CGS is an important tool in promoting scientists' creativity since it serves as a source of funding for many of them, especially the young who are eager to experiment and are filled with many innovative research ideas. One participant pointed out that in the South, there is a major exodus of scientists from the public sector going to the private sector since there are not enough incentives at the public sector. Providing possible

source of funds for them, albeit through competitive bidding, contributes to mobilizing a critical mass (a research capacity) towards addressing certain research issues with development-related objectives.

Is the CGS an appropriate tool for promoting partnerships? Would such partnerships be long lasting and sustainable?

6. CGS is an appropriate tool to promote cooperation in research. However, the “level” of partnerships developed from CGS may vary depending on how closely organizations collaborate in the conduct of their research project¹.
7. Often, research partnerships are not always sustainable since cooperation is often purpose-driven and time-bound, i.e. for the duration of the project supported by the competitive grants for which they bound to deliver a specified output. While this may appear unsustainable, working relationship among organizations involved in a particular project financed through research does not necessarily end when the project ends since a “link” between these organizations. Such “linkage” can be further exploited for future research collaboration.

What types of accompanying measures can be put in place to ensure that CGS funds reach the groups that need funding the most?

8. The importance of capacity building in the area of proposal writing and research management was highlighted. Capacity building plays a critical role in assisting stakeholders to access research grants. Often, only scientists who are used to preparing project proposals are the ones who win in CGS which somehow “systematically” eliminates others limited capacity to write project proposals notwithstanding the novel and innovative ideas they may be putting forward in their project proposals².
9. Training on writing project proposals for CGS is thus deemed useful. In fact, a number of CGS such as that of FONTAGRO³, Generation CP and that of ASARECA have included this as among their key activities to accompany their respective Calls for Proposals. It should, however, be noted that training are carried out to allow more countries to be more competitive. It may not directly respond to the question of them getting the funds but this is a step forward. Researchers should continuously strive to improve their skills by responding to various Calls for Proposals. As one participant put it, submitting project proposal in itself has an inherent capacity building component since proponents are forced to address demand-driven research and develop their ideas based on the specific requirements and research priorities of the CGS they are applying for.
10. As well, NARIs should more systematically integrate such skills training in their regular activities not only since CGS are good source of additional research funding but also as a means to build their (skills) human capital.
11. In addition to promoting quality and relevance of research CGS may also be used to improve research management in the South. Since most CGS-funded projects involve various research organizations, addressing benefits-sharing and handling intellectual property rights (IPR) issues, especially if private sectors are involved, should be taken into account in the design future CGS. Other accompanying measures proposed include fellowship, travel grants and training courses

Given the usual short duration of CGS is there any evidence of impact on national research capacities? How can this be measured?

¹ One participant opined that there may perhaps be a need to distinguish collaboration from partnership. This obviously brings to the fore the issue of defining discriminant parameters to qualify one from the other.

² A participant opined that sometimes the main issue is the eligibility criteria. Some good proposals are eliminated due to very rigid criteria. How flexible can CGSs be to accommodate innovative proposals?

³ An example cited was when FONTAGRO realized that there is an imbalance of capacity among FONTAGRO member countries. Only medium and big-sized countries got most of the funds under its CGS since these are more tuned to preparing good project proposals. This was addressed by organizing one-week training workshops on proposal development targeting researchers from small member countries. As a result, succeeding calls resulted to having 2 out of 5 proposals from small countries obtaining funds. FONTAGRO intends to do more training in the near future.

12. While CGS as a research-financing mechanism is generally viewed contributing to building national research capacity, evidence of impacts is not readily available let alone measure such impacts. Since CGS funding is not the only funding source of NARS, it is all the more difficult to attribute whether improved national research (and management) capacity is due to CGS funding.
13. However, participants tend to agree that CGS funding, being time-bound, may not sustainable in the long-term. Donors usually provide funds for two to five years and are hardly renewable. As such, some argued that (small) grants schemes and the short-term funding nature of CGS may not at all be making the right dent in agricultural research, especially in Africa.
14. As such, other innovative and sustainable financing mechanisms should be explored in financing agricultural research. One such instrument could be the use of Endowment Funds such as that of FONTAGRO. The FONTAGRO Endowment Fund serves as a tool to finance technology development and innovation in Latin America and the Caribbean thus generating regional public goods. The Fund facilitates research collaboration in Science and Technology among its 14 member-countries which themselves provide capital investments of up to \$35 million. As an Endowment Fund, it maintains its value while capital gains and other funding sources are used to support research thus providing financial stability. Moreover, the research agenda is set by its members and partners thus ensuring that only regional research needs and priorities are financed through this grant mechanism. Such mechanism is deemed to contribute significantly not only in terms of improved national research capacity but also towards a more regional approach to research collaboration. The FONTAGRO Regional Fund was deemed interesting and participants expressed their interest to learn more about it given its potential as a sustainable financing mechanism for agricultural research, especially at the regional level.
15. Another issue raised was that while most of the CGS are about financing research, research delivery should not be overlooked since after all, the delivery of research is what (often) paves the way for the creating impact and not necessarily the financing and/or conduct of research *per se*. Such is the case in the GCP where every research activity financed whether through its CGS or commissioned research are required to define its "Research/Product Delivery Plan"⁴ in order to veer away from the conventional tendency that research is detached from service delivery where research results are often go only to publication and do not reach anyone.

Other issues raised

16. Huge inefficiency in running CGS should be looked at
17. There is a need to harmonize deadlines of various CGS since researchers tend to jump from one proposal development to another in order to beat deadlines, implying less time available for actual research and experimentation.
18. On ensuring that CGS funds go to those who need funding the most, the weak stakeholders and those who need funding may not necessarily be the same. How can CGS be better targeted to address both?

Some recommendations

19. GFAR may organize discussion workshops for sharing various experiences in CGS implementation. The first session may involve various Challenge Programmes implementing CGS since there is no mechanism as of yet that will allow a systematic sharing of experience among these CGS.
20. With CGS as source of research funds deemed not to be sustainable, GFAR may facilitate strategic discussion especially among Regional Foras on various mechanisms for sustainable financing. The FONTAGRO experience, despite its own issues, may provide a very interesting case as a take off point of discussion.

⁴ A recommendation put forward by the GCP Stakeholder Committee being facilitated by GFAR