REPORT ON
A SURVEY OF ISNAR STAKEHOLDERS

conducted August - September 1996
by the Evaluation Unit, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada
prepared for ISNAR, The Hague

October 23, 1996
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ASARECA</td>
<td>Association for Strengthening Agricultural Research in Eastern and Central Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CG</td>
<td>see CGIAR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CGIAR</td>
<td>Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBS</td>
<td>Intermediary Biotechnology Service (ISNAR-based)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IFPRI</td>
<td>International Food Policy Research Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INFORM</td>
<td>Information for Agricultural Research Managers (ISNAR-developed management information system)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISNAR</td>
<td>International Service for National Agricultural Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARI(s)</td>
<td>national agricultural research institution(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARS</td>
<td>national agricultural research system(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGO(s)</td>
<td>non-governmental organisation(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPAAR</td>
<td>Special Program for African Agricultural Research (World Bank-based)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the findings of a telephone survey of 24 stakeholders of the International Service for National Agricultural Research (ISNAR)\(^1\). It draws out the survey findings on ISNAR’s strengths, weaknesses, constraints, and suggestions for improvements and the comments on ISNAR’s outputs, impact, and reputation. The synopsis of the main trends in the feedback follows in three subsections and is complemented by a summary of respondents’ comments on ISNAR’s key role, strengths, weaknesses, suggested improvements, and constraints in Table 1. The synopsis is followed by a brief elaboration on selected issues raised through the survey responses. These include: the level of familiarity with ISNAR and its work; ISNAR’s role in the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) and the international agricultural research system; ISNAR’s services; and ISNAR’s staffing. They present more detail on the findings and Table 2 lists the respondents’ ratings on eight closed questions. The appendices contain the methodology, instrument, sample selection profile, and a list of stakeholder organisations contacted.

MAIN TRENDS IN FEEDBACK ON ISNAR:
ROLE AND CONTRIBUTIONS, VISION AND NICHE, CONSTRAINTS

Role and Contributions

| Finding: | ISNAR’s work in capacity strengthening, liaison, and advocacy is an important component of the CGIAR and the international agricultural research system, and of the support to national agricultural research systems. |

Overall, the stakeholders surveyed considered ISNAR an important component of the international agricultural research system and the support to it — in ISNAR’s case the support to institution-building and strengthening of National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS) and their institutions in developing countries. Two-thirds see ISNAR’s key role as a leader in two capacities: (i) in institutional strengthening of national agricultural research systems through guidance and tools for organisational change and capacity building; and (ii) in ISNAR’s intermediary and advocacy role for NARS. One respondent referred to it as leadership in “the emerging global research system” linking NARS and regional organisations in South and North and supporting structural and organisational shifts. Roughly one quarter of the two-thirds who referred to this lead role would like to also see ISNAR address new trends in topically complex areas relevant to NARS such as biotechnology.

\(^1\) The profile of the respondents is as follows: 15 donor representatives (3 of these donors do not currently fund ISNAR); 5 collaborators; and 4 who fall in neither of the previous categories. One provides core funding only; nine provide core and have projects with ISNAR; eight undertake projects or collaborate on activities with ISNAR; and of all 24, 15 have informal contact with ISNAR, including 9 who also have a formal institutional relationship. Of the fifteen who specified the country context on which they based their comments, 12 referred to Africa, 3 to Latin America or the Caribbean, and 3 to Asia (3 specified two or more). (See also the section on Level of Familiarity and the methodology and sample selection in the appendices.)
natural resource management, ecosystems, and privatisation or private sector collaboration. (See Table 1. and section on ISNAR’s Role for more detail.)

[We are] quite excited about some of ISNAR’s work, not in-country but the more general work – for instance, on institutional performance assessment, forms for accountability, etc. Stakeholder

Stakeholders saw ISNAR’s contributions to date in the areas they identified for ISNAR’s leadership role. For instance, they commented on ISNAR’s achievements in liaising between the CGIAR and NARS; raising awareness for the needs and context of NARS; strengthening research institutions and national systems in research management and priority setting; and helping them become a better negotiation partner for donors. (See also Table 1.)

In terms of ISNAR’s principal achievement: maintaining public attention on national research programmes and associated policy issues. Stakeholder

Vision and Niche

Finding: ISNAR needs a clearer vision and strong leadership to better focus on its strategic niche and improve its performance.

Along with citing strengths and contributions, half of the respondents felt that ISNAR needed a clearer vision and strong leadership to better focus its activities and define well its strategic niche. Four of them raised it as one of ISNAR’s primary constraints. Also, half of all interviewees expressed directly the view that ISNAR could and should do even better and 50 per cent of them are included above as commenting on vision, leadership, and niche. At the same time, most acknowledged that it was not an easy task, in part given the mandate and the context in which ISNAR has to work -- a context stakeholders characterised as, for instance, lacking support to agricultural research as a priority nationally and internationally, and the weakness of some NARS, particularly in Africa.

The initial support period or “honeymoon” is over for ISNAR. This is the second decade; there is more pressure to be clear about what it is they are offering, now that they are a mature centre. Stakeholder

ISNAR does a useful job and a very difficult job in terms of the diversity of NARS. But there are other players in this competitive world. ISNAR has to look carefully at what it does well and play to those strengths. Stakeholder

Respondents who touched on ISNAR’s ‘bi-focus’ on research as well as technical assistance commented in part on a perceived tension in the weighting of these two spheres of activity. To most respondents the technical service, in symbiosis with a focussed research component, was more important. This finding is not surprising considering that the majority of the stakeholders answer based on their experience as development assistance practitioners as opposed to researchers. Four interviewees, however, expressed concerns about indications of a lack of attention given to research
and a perceived decline in the conceptual basis for the work. (See section ISNAR’s Role for more
detail.)

[I wonder] whether the conceptual base is adequate in terms of the
research which lays the basis for ISNAR’s involvement with the
NARS....[I] sense a decline. Stakeholder

There needs to be a creative tension between research and action or the
advisory services which feeds into the information function. This synergy
of research, advisory, and information needs to be articulated in ISNAR’s
vision. Stakeholder

Four interviewees suggested that components of ISNAR’s work could be fulfilled by other research
institutions or consulting firms but had different views on the specifics. One, for instance, considered
ISNAR dispensable in terms of the services it provides to them, indicating that other research
institutions or consulting firms could fulfill that role, but also considered ISNAR to play an important
intermediary and liaison role. Others commented to the contrary. For instance, one respondent
considered it important to have one locus of knowledge and experience for continuity, as opposed
to working with different consulting groups. Another one considered ISNAR’s advantage to lie in
its position as an independent international institution and part of the CGIAR system.

[The programme study we worked on] could have been done by
consultants, but is better done by an institution with institutional memory,
like ISNAR, because it can then apply and disseminate [the findings].
Stakeholder

ISNAR’s comparative advantage is in the planning phase of agricultural
research, not in the implementation phases; there are other institutions
[that do that]. Stakeholder

According to respondents speaking to ISNAR’s technical assistance, these services should continue
to concentrate on strengthening NARS but need to be adjusted in focus, approach, and synergy and
be of a consistently high quality. The stakeholder responses show that ISNAR’s reputation for the
quality of its work is in the range of medium to high and seen to have room for improvement, for
instance in the level and language of publications. (See Table 1. and sections on Services and Staffing
for more detail.)

There has been a problem with ISNAR and some of its publications in terms
of developing “ISNAR speak”. It gets in the way of effective
communication. They should focus on producing in clear and plain
language, particularly given that English and French are second languages
for many researchers. Stakeholder
Constraints

Finding: ISNAR is constrained by its limited core budget and size but also by the complexity and context of its task as well as a lack of a clearer focus for its activities.

Half of all respondents considered the budget and size of ISNAR as one of its main constraints curtailing its capacity to meet the demand more effectively. Among these respondents, however, some pointed out either that these were symptoms of the larger issues of priorities nationally, internationally as well as of ISNAR itself, or that a larger budget was not the solution -- what was needed instead was a more strategic focus and more cooperation. Two others stated specifically that funding was not among the primary constraints. About half of the interviewees set out components of ISNAR’s context as constraints. For instance, they commented that working with research institutions in developing countries is a difficult task or that ISNAR generally faces problems similar to other small development and research institutions working in the low priority field of agriculture and the “soft” area of institutional and capacity building where results are also subject to many external factors. Other constraints mentioned included the lack of a clear vision, limited regional presence, and the experience and number of staff. (See also Table 1)

But despite the constraints, ISNAR has done a great job.
Stakeholder
Table 1. Overview of what Stakeholders Raised in the Survey (in order of relevance*)

* Please note that, within each grouping in a box (separated by a blank line), the points are listed in order of frequency with which they were referred to by the stakeholders.

### ISNAR’S KEY ROLE

- guidance and tools for institutional strengthening and organisational change and restructuring in NARS
- link or intermediary between NARS in developing countries and international system and national systems of developed countries
- raise awareness and understanding in international community of situation, needs, policy issues, and priorities of NARS
- provide leadership in emerging global research system linking NARS in North and South, strengthening regional organisations, and follow-up support, better negotiating partner and position vis-a-vis donors
- facilitating broader national policy dialogue for agricultural research giving weight and providing safeguard against local politics; receives higher priority from government
- contributing to closer link between research and extension and better client-orientation
- development of tools and methodologies (rather than application); e.g. programme planning and priority setting
- quality analysis and publications, competent staff
- training highly relevant and appreciated
- access to global data and knowledge; information source; able to compare new information and data generated that would not otherwise exist, e.g. indicators work, biotechnology
- independent international organisation knowing the institutions, the players, and about institutional strengthening
- advocate of and responsive to needs of developing countries rather than to those of donors
- linkage function between NARS and CG and NARS to NARS fertilisation
- contribution to evolution of relationship between NARS, CG centres, and CGIAR; putting NARS situation and needs on CG and international agenda
- creating platforms for international exchanges on agricultural research
- timely and important contributions such as contributing to building regional systems (e.g. ASARECA) and initiatives such as Intermediary Biotechnology Services (IBS)
- ISNAR often fills vacuum with guiding documentation

### STRONG

- strengthening NARS and national agricultural research
- strengthening of agricultural research community; better policy and planning capacity, can better express their needs and demands and are more realistic, easier for donors to support, better negotiating partner and position vis-a-vis donors
- facilitating broader national policy dialogue for agricultural research giving weight and providing safeguard against local politics; receives higher priority from government
- contributing to closer link between research and extension and better client-orientation
- development of tools and methodologies (rather than application); e.g. programme planning and priority setting
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### IMPROVE

- focus and communicate better mandate, role, niche, focus, and approach
- develop into centre for excellence on research management; increase management science capacity; adapt institutional management developments
- clarify division of labour among CG centres
- synthesise lessons learned from research and experience, impact assessment, distill best practices, realise multiplier effect and replicability
- better regional presence and accessibility for NARS
- emphasise support to regional structures more
- deal more with timely and complex issues NARS will have to tackle, e.g. biotechnology, privatisation or private sector collaboration
- offer follow-up support to implement changes (tool kits or facilitation of process)
- find new ways of financing (e.g. private sector collaboration, services on consulting basis)
- use more local experts
- work with clients of NARS as well as with the research institutes
- more “quick and dirty”, “how to”, and client-oriented approaches for field
- strengthen linkages more, e.g. by expanding use of information and communication technologies

### WEAK

- at times too top down, “North American”, blueprint approach
- level and language of some methodologies and publications demanding; too academic and strategic, not applied and practical enough
- strengthening individual NARIs rather than NARS and working only with government side of NARS
- lack of focus, clearer vision, and communication of both
- lack of cooperation with other centres and institutions
- insufficient capacity to follow-up and follow-through on recommendations and organisational change processes (e.g. with master plans)
- quality and availability of expertise can stand and fall with individual staff
- low regional presence
- lacking expertise in management science
- dichotomy between research and services
- perceived decline in conceptual basis (research) for work
CONSTRAINTS

institutions
- budget and general capacity to respond to demand or to provide follow-up or continuing support
- lack of clear vision, mandate, and strategy
- field presence and accessibility for NARS
- organisational culture and approach; number and expertise of staff
- lack of cooperation with other centres
- ISNAR’s mission, role and approach not necessarily well understood

context
- high demand for assistance and diverse needs and priorities of NARS; priorities of national governments vary; differing levels of capacity
- continuous need to adapt to developments; number of NARS increasing; new directions and issues
- globally low priority of development assistance, research, agriculture, soft assistance (institution / capacity-building); CG only 5% of global research effort, ISNAR only part of it but responsible for addressing management and policy approaches for 95%
- ISNAR one of two non commodity-oriented centres within CG; generally CG more technical-scientific, whereas ISNAR more social science
- small international development research and technical assistance institution
Level of Familiarity with ISNAR and its Work

Finding: ISNAR is well known but does not communicate well its mandate, approach, and achievements.

The survey results suggest that, while ISNAR is well known, it may not communicate well what it does and how it does it. One stakeholder remarked that his colleagues “have difficulty understanding how ISNAR ticks [works]”. Another stated that ISNAR should better communicate its mandate. Others commented that ISNAR is well known: one stakeholder said that “if you ask NARS for CG centre names, they will name ISNAR”; another stated that ISNAR has somewhat of a monopoly in what it does and that people think of ISNAR for institutional strengthening in agricultural research.

Another indicator in this context is the stakeholders’ level of familiarity with ISNAR and its work. Thus, for instance, between one quarter and one third of the interviewees did not respond to questions regarding the in-country projects for strengthening NARS, often because they considered themselves to lack adequate knowledge to comment (see Table 2, a., b., and e.).2 Similarly, looking at the extent to which stakeholders indentified their familiarity in their responses overall, the interviewer rated each interview: the majority was ranked medium. (See Box 1) Stakeholders clearly responded from different knowledge bases which was in part linked to the organisational relationship (e.g. core funding vs. special projects) and a function of the level of overlap in priorities with ISNAR. Not surprisingly, however, the most knowledgeable were those who had, at some point in their careers, worked at, or very closely with, ISNAR.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Familiarity</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ISNAR’s Role in CG and International Agricultural Research System

Finding: ISNAR fills what used to be a gap in the CG support system.

Most respondents see ISNAR’s role as important and indispensable until NARS and regional bodies are sufficiently strong to take on ISNAR’s tasks themselves. As five of the respondents put it, if ISNAR did not exist, another institution would have to fulfill its role or ISNAR would have to be created. One respondent pointed out that it was established as a non commodity-oriented centre to strengthen NARS filling a gap within the CG support system. A couple of respondents pointed to

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2 Others did not rate because they felt it was up to the NARS to answer those questions (a.; b.) or because it was a question of impact which they felt could not yet be answered.
the fact that ISNAR is also very different in that it, along with IFPRI, is the only centre within the CG that is not commodity-oriented, that it has a larger and more difficult mandate, and is somewhat of an oddity with its social science focus in the techno-scientific environment of the CGIAR.

*ISNAR was given the most difficult task of the CGIAR: to strengthen NARS.*

Stakeholder

[A comparative advantage is the] fertilisation between NARS that ISNAR can do and no one else; I have seen them do it and it doesn’t seem to be picked up by anyone else.

Stakeholder

Overall, most interviewees considered ISNAR an important component of the CG system and instrumental to the international as well as the national systems, mostly because it has raised and maintained international awareness about the situation, needs, and demands of the NARS. Half of them commented specifically on the international linkage and awareness raising; half also referred specifically to ISNAR’s contributions to strengthening national agricultural research. According to individual respondents, ISNAR has played an important role in:

- providing the interface between the international system and the NARS of developing countries and raising awareness and understanding among the CGIAR and its members for the situation and needs of the NARS;
- advocating for NARS to remain on the agenda and be invited to the table and helping integrate the new developing country donors to the CGIAR;
- creating platforms for exchange on agricultural research and research policy and management;
- strengthening the capacity of NARS institutions it has worked with to manage research more efficiently and effectively, for instance due to better client-orientation, and to set priorities and communicate them to donors; as a result, respondents commented, donors have found these institutions to be easier to cooperate with and support;
- NARS restructuring; and
- linking NARS amongst themselves.

The value of the contributions was highlighted in comments such as on:

- timely initiatives such as the Intermediary Biotechnology Service (IBS);
- the readily available methods and tools and their generally high quality;
- the high quality training;
- the seminal character of selected publications, such as *Science Under Scarcity,* and high quality of the country case studies and briefing notes; and
- the master plans developed in selected countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding:</th>
<th>Institutional strengthening tasks need to be better coordinated among the CG centres.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

One out of three respondents indicated that there is a need for better cooperation and delineation between ISNAR and CG or other organisations on the institutional strengthening work and between ISNAR and IFPRI, in particular, on policy research. The few suggested solutions span the spectrum: one respondent suggested to concentrate all institutional strengthening activities in ISNAR and for the commodity-oriented centres to disengage from it except where commodity-specific issues play...
a role; another suggested for ISNAR to coordinate the links between the CGIAR and NARS and to build the capacity of the other CG centres to strengthen institutional capacity in the field. Four respondents commented to the effect that ISNAR should not be involved with policy other than in terms of providing guidance to their partners on how to work on policy research. Another interviewee suggested ISNAR needed to work more at the national decision-making level in synergy with IFPRI to improve effectiveness. Three respondents suggested a strong Africa focus.

Table 2: Rating Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions and Ratings</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Would you say that ISNAR’s in-country projects for strengthening NARS are:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>irrelevant</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat relevant</td>
<td>*9</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>highly relevant</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t know</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| (* Note: of which one answered “case dependent”)

b. Do ISNAR’s in-country strengthening projects produce useable outputs that have a practical application?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>not useful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat useful</td>
<td><strong>11</strong></td>
<td>45.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>very useful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>don’t know</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| (** Note: of which four, or 16.7% of 24, answered “in some cases yes, in others no”)

c. Does ISNAR’s work (projects and products and services) help your institution fulfill its mandate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>70.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>somewhat</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

d. Overall, would you rate the benefits of ISNAR’s work to your institution as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(low-medium)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(medium-high)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(don’t know)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
e. Overall, would you rate the benefits of ISNAR’s work towards strengthening NARS as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(low-medium)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(medium-high)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(don’t know)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not rated)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

f. As far as you know, what is the reputation of ISNAR with respect to the overall quality of its work?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(low-medium)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(medium-high)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

g. As far as you know, what is the reputation of ISNAR with respect to the overall quality of its impact?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>medium</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>54.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(low-medium)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(medium-high)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(don’t know)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not rated)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Please note that don’t know was chosen when respondents did not know or did not want to comment or rate due to limited knowledge; ratings listed in round brackets were chosen by respondents and made available to them in cases of hesitation, but were not part of the original standard instrument; any minor numerical discrepancies are due to rounding errors.)*

Finding: ISNAR should strive for a healthy and synergistic balance between its research and technical assistance activities.

Commenting on the two activity areas of service and research, most respondents suggested that there should be a healthy balance and synergy between these. Of the 16 who commented in some form: 14 supported a balanced approach; one interviewee emphasised research and would like to see service activities offered as part of an ISNAR consulting arm; and another one did not see any need for further research and suggested that ISNAR should focus exclusively on the service side. Of the 14 in favour of a balanced synergy, four expressed concerns about indications of a lack of attention given to research in more recent years.
Finding: ISNAR helps stakeholders fulfill their mandate.

Commenting on the relevance of ISNAR’s work to the stakeholder agencies, over two thirds of the respondents (71%) stated that ISNAR helps their institution fulfill its mandate and one third rated the benefits of ISNAR’s work to their institution as high or medium-high (see Table 2, c. and d.). To explain their lower rating, four of the respondents indicated that the relevance is very much a function of the overlap in mandate or of common priorities.

Services - Awareness and Quality, Relevance of Outputs, and Impact

Finding: ISNAR is best known for its capacity building in research management, its methods and tools, priority setting and strategic planning, training, and publications.

The survey asked stakeholders to name ISNAR products or services with which they are familiar. Using these replies combined with the products or services mentioned throughout the interviews, the listing in Box 2 was compiled and a rating attached based on how many respondents referred to them. This shows that most stakeholders highly associate ISNAR with capacity-building for research management, methods and tools, research priority setting and strategic planning, workshops, training, and publications.

Box 2

Respondents’ Awareness Levels of ISNAR’s Products and Services
general capacity building for research management, H
general capacity building for research management, H
research priority setting, H
research priority setting, H
strategic planning, master plans, H
NARS restructuring, M
programme planning methods, M
methods and tools, M
workshops (research policy, management, gender), H
training, H
publications, M
newsletter, M
briefing notes, M
guidelines / manuals, M
country studies, M
specific publications (e.g. on FSR, indicators, Science under Scarcity), M
INFORM, M
IBS; biotechnology, M
FSR, L
indicators work, L
monitoring and evaluation, L
MIS, M
information & communication (ICT), L
eco-system / eco-regional programming, L

Finding: ISNAR projects and services receive overall high marks but also criticism.

The individual projects or services with which respondents were familiar received high marks in many cases, but also criticism. Over half of the respondents commended one or several of the following for relevance, usefulness, or ready availability: tools and methodologies in general; priority setting and programme planning in particular; publications; and training.

Rating the relevance of ISNAR’s in-country projects for strengthening NARS, about one third of the respondents answered somewhat relevant, another third answered highly relevant (37.5%,
referring. Another quarter responded don’t know because they felt either that NARS representatives would have to answer this, that it was too early to tell; or that they had insufficient knowledge to judge. One respondent raised the question that, while they are relevant, are they sufficient, and felt that there is more to be covered. One interviewee also pointed out a distinction between indirect, longer-term and direct contributions. This respondent underscored that ISNAR, through, for instance, its linkage work and training materials, contributes much in the first category, which should also be rated highly. Two respondents suggested that ISNAR seemed to be quite successful in small countries and less so in larger ones.

Rating whether the in-country projects produce useable outputs, almost half of the respondents (46%) considered them somewhat useful and another quarter very useful (see Table 2, b.). Respondents qualified the relevance and usefulness as dependent on the case, for instance dependent on the willingness of the government or the local situation; on collaboration with other donors; or, in isolated cases, on the effectiveness of ISNAR staff.

 ISNAR has had a major influence on NARS. It has influenced a few NARS and several NARIS on organization and management. It influenced some on methodologies, planning, monitoring and evaluation, and information systems; in a few cases in terms of changing the institutional model, like Costa Rica, they were very successful. Rather than shaping management, Costa Rica was a NARS approach and good. In other cases, no. This can be very peculiar to the country, not to the international partner.

Stakeholder

Voicing criticism on ISNAR’s technical assistance, stakeholders commented that it should:

• be more focussed;
• be synergistic with other CG and similar efforts;
• build more on past experience;
• develop regional capacity to take on ISNAR’s role;
• benefit more from organisational management expertise and research;
• work more at the level of NARS, including non-governmental components of it, as opposed to selected government NARIs;
• have a higher field presence;
• support the change process rather than just the process for planning the change; and
• provide more support in new areas of importance to NARS such as biotechnology and privatisation.

Referring to ISNAR’s approach, ten respondents commented critically referring to it:

• as being at times too top-down and “North American (pushy)”;
• that the level and language of some methodologies and publications was too academic and not applied or practical enough; and
• that master plans were good but, at times, considered to be too much of a blueprint approach and too static to have any significant lifespan as a planning tool.

Its strength is at the same time a weakness: ISNAR has a clear concept of how agricultural research should be organized and structured. However, the weakness is that it tries to apply that same thing everywhere... There is little flexibility to adapt to local contexts. They use the very same
One out of four interviewees noted a limitation of services to planning and a lack of follow-through support, such as facilitation of the process of change or process tools; two respondents included this in their comments on constraints. Nine respondents remarked on the lack of follow-up work such as impact assessments, synthesising lessons learned, distilling best practices, and realising multiplier effects or replicability. One respondent also pointed out that ISNAR appears to tend to work with individual institutions (NARIs), not NARS as a whole. Another interviewee noted that it tends to work only with government institutions, not with the rest of the NARS, such as NGOs, or even involve the private sector, for instance in an advisory committee for ISNAR. One respondent suggested to work more with the clients of NARS. Another noted that ISNAR’s involvement on components of NARS is not necessarily effective unless it also looks at the whole. Much of the criticism was, however, accompanied by qualifiers such as ISNAR’s dependence on the willingness and motivation of the partner governments and institutions as well as ISNAR’s resources and capacity for extended assistance; but it was suggested that mechanisms of cooperation might be found if given priority.

**Finding:** ISNAR’s services tend to be limited to planning, to individual government institutions, and tend to lack follow-through support; field presence is also limited.

*ISNAR needs to do more on management of organizational change and organizational development techniques. They have done lots on economic techniques and some on management, such as INFORM, or on human resources, personnel and accounting. The tools and methods are one thing, but accompanying organizational change should do more. Manuals and training courses are good, but understanding how institutions or research organisations can change from their original to the desired state requires more. It’s one thing to describe the desired state, but you also need tools for how to bring about change.*

**Stakeholder**

The issue of the location and field presence came up in the context of ISNAR’s technical assistance services and elsewhere. While four interviewees advocated for ISNAR’s location in a developing country for a variety of reasons, including that of being closer to the field, the other six who commented on field presence were concerned with the presence of ISNAR staff in general, independent of the location of its headquarters.

**Finding:** ISNAR’s reputation for quality and impact is overall good but not uniformly excellent.

Generally, respondents reported that ISNAR does not have a reputation of uniformly excellent performance and ascribed it to factors such as perceived weaknesses of ISNAR (aspects of lack of vision or focus, etc.), and the difficulty of the task, the context, and the limited resources to respond.
Consequently, rating the reputation of the quality of ISNAR's work, respondents split almost exactly in the middle between medium and high: half answered high or medium-high (25%, respectively) and the other half answered medium (45.8%, and one respondent, or 4.2%, low-medium) (see Table 1, f).

Similarly, the reputation of the quality of ISNAR's impact was rated as medium by 54% and as high or medium-high by another fifth (see Table 2, g.). Those stakeholders felt that ISNAR had made a difference for NARS and agricultural research in general. In their survey responses overall, half of the stakeholders commented on ISNAR's contributions to strengthening NARS and building their capacity in managing research and their organisations. ISNAR's contributions to priority setting, in particular, were highlighted by a quarter of the respondents. Half of the interviewees commented on ISNAR's contributions to agricultural research through its international and regional liaison work and raising awareness about the needs and context of NARS. One stakeholder expressed that ISNAR has made a difference in national agricultural research, but that there is still a long way to go.

At the same time, several stakeholders raised questions about the scope of the impact. Comments related to:
- ISNAR's effectiveness and quality of products and services;
- what effort ISNAR had made to demonstrate impact;
- the factors in the context of ISNAR work reducing the potential for impact, such as the lack of motivation or capacity of the counterpart; and
- ISNAR's lacking capacity to follow up and provide support to implement plans.

Suggestions included:
- that ISNAR should look at impact;
- to consider different levels of impact, such as the clients of NARS or the international scene;
- that the impact should be judged by ISNAR's clients;
- that an assessment should be done based on performance indicators, rather than client satisfaction.

One fifth did not rate the impact reputation -- several because they felt they did not know enough to comment, others because they felt it was too early to say or it would be second-hand information. Several others commented on the difficulty to assess impact, particularly in ISNAR's work.

The quality of ISNAR's work is relatively high - academically. However, there is a question mark about targeting and impact. Stakeholder

When you look at the effectiveness of NARS today in technology development, they have moved a long ways ahead from one or two decades ago. Part of the credit is due to ISNAR. Stakeholder
Staffing and Capacity

| Finding | ISNAR has a limited capacity to perform well and to satisfy demand due both to its size and to the quality, composition, and expertise of its staff. |

More than half (14) of the respondents commented on staffing linking it to different issues such as the niche, the effectiveness of field interventions, and leadership and management. One quarter of the respondents pointed out that the quality of ISNAR’s work can often be linked to the individual, be it in research or technical assistance. They mentioned, for instance, that certain researchers had left behind a gap when they parted with ISNAR. From the respondents’ field experiences, they commended ISNAR staff for generally excellent work but commented that they had heard or seen that some staff did not necessarily seem to have the right mix of technical expertise, experience, and interpersonal and diplomatic skills.

*ISNAR has a highly qualified staff. They are very good, but some people don’t have the developing country experience necessary to understand the problems.*

Stakeholder

Overall, respondents considered the staffing to be of good quality, including some excellent individuals, but suggested that it could be higher. One respondent discussed the quality of the staffing and available expertise in the context of the managerial challenge a small institute poses and/or the ability to attract high caliber staff with a limited budget. As staffing also relates to the question of niche and focus, four respondents indicated that, given strategic choices, ISNAR would have to review the profile of its current staff compared to the needs of the institution to serve its mandate -- for instance, to build research expertise in organisational management by hiring researchers from that field, as three respondent suggested.

A recurrent topic in the survey was also the high number of demands on, and requests for, ISNAR’s assistance. Of those who commented on this, they commended ISNAR for a quick turnaround time on responding to enquiries and providing information, pointers, or contacts. One respondent also mentioned that ISNAR does not take on a job until it has identified the appropriate individual to do the work. Another respondent highlighted the cooperation with local experts as positive and something they would like to see happen more. Three more commented on hiring more local experts or strengthening local capacity to do some of ISNAR’s work, such as training.

**CONCLUSION**

**Achievements**

The stakeholders commended ISNAR for its contributions to strengthening national agricultural research in developing countries and to advocacy and liaison between the national and the international system. The survey indicates that ISNAR is well known to stakeholders and clients as a name, albeit somewhat less known are the range of activities and services it undertakes, how it approaches them, and with what results and impact. It has a good reputation, but not one of uniform...
excellence. The quality of the products and services is considered medium to high and a number of improvements were suggested.

Impact

When asked about ISNAR’s impact, respondents tended to reiterate the achievements and contributions they had mentioned. Some felt, however, that it was too early to say or that they did not have enough knowledge or first-hand information to comment. Several respondents also expressed doubts about ISNAR’s effectiveness and impact. Overall, there appears to be a lack of hard evidence or information and several stakeholders commented with suggestions for ISNAR to take a look at impact.

Constraints

The constraints stakeholders identified can be categorised as those internal and those external to ISNAR, or within and outside the power of the institution. Their statements regarding the need for a stronger vision, niche, and leadership of ISNAR fall into the first category. The second category of stakeholders’ comments is the international and national priority given to research in general, and to agricultural research in particular. The specific constraints respondents noted, such as budget and capacity to fulfill its mandate as the major ones, are, as some pointed out, symptoms or functions of the combination of the two primary, overarching constraints: the context and the niche, whereby the niche is obviously to some extent also a function of the supported priorities.
Appendices
### Appendix A

**Sample Countries or Initiatives Referred to by Respondents**

Respondents referred to their experiences with, or reputation of ISNAR, activities in and with these sample countries and institutions or initiatives:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>Tanzania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mozambique</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Morocco</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhutan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
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<tr>
<td>ASARECA</td>
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<tr>
<td>CG-NARS Partnership Initiative</td>
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<tr>
<td>IBS</td>
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<tr>
<td>SPAAR</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
Appendix B

Instrument

The instrument (interview guide) was developed by IDRC with feedback from the consultant team and ISNAR based on a preliminary instrument designed by the team during the first mission to ISNAR in May 1996. The intention was to canvass the stakeholders on the issues of ISNAR’s strengths, weaknesses, constraints, outputs, impact, reputation, and suggestions for future direction. (See also attached instrument. Please note that the product and service categories initially developed as analytical backdrop to question 4 proved too detailed.)

Interviews took between 30-60 minutes. The instrument proved to be somewhat repetitive in many cases, partially because respondents have limited knowledge of experience, or interaction with, ISNAR. This, however, was not a problem, mainly for two reasons: firstly, in some cases, it provided respondents the opportunity to reflect on their initial responses or add to them; and, secondly, because the survey was conducted by phone in a conversation style by a single interviewer, the handling was flexible and appropriate for the flow of the conversation (e.g. “You mentioned earlier that …., would you consider it the most important constraint that ISNAR faces or is there something else?”). Overall, the instrument served the purpose well and a better instrument may not be easily created for such a diverse group - diverse both in terms of the interest and capacity to respond with informed comments, subject to the knowledge of, and relationship with, ISNAR.

Method and Response Rate

In cooperation with the consultant team and ISNAR, IDRC selected a sample of 30 interviewees from a list of 101 contacts provided by ISNAR. The sampling methodology and sample profile is described in the attached appendix entitled “Survey Sample Selection”. (See Appendix D.)

The three contacts selected for test interviews proved to be among the more difficult to reach. Those contacts were therefore integrated into the overall survey. The test interviewees were those who could be reached first. The initial interviews did not result in any changes to the instrument.

Several of the contacts delegated another staff member to respond. In one case, two individuals from the same organisation responded, but one spoke based on the experience of his previous position in a different organisation. The response rate is thus 24 out of 30 initial contacts (80%). 12 out of 13 donor contacts responded, 3 of the 4 non-granting donors, 5 of the 6 collaborators, and 4 out of 7+1 in the “other” category responded.
Briefly outline format of interview:
Start with a couple of warm-up questions, then go into some of ISNAR’s activities, and finish with your input on the larger questions for an institution like ISNAR.

Name
______________________________________________

Position
______________________________________________

Organisation
______________________________________________

A) Warm-up

1) How did you come to know ISNAR?

probe for: known for how long?
   in what ways?
   experiences with ISNAR?
   basis for knowledge / opinion of ISNAR?
2) In the last five years, has your organization had any contact with ISNAR, such as provided funding, used its services, or even just met informally?

(looking for nature / degree / intensity of contact and stake - e.g. funding)

a) record: Yes No

b) probe for:
   - in what ways?
   - collaboration - how?
   - funding - amount? portion of donor budget?
   - informal meeting
   - networking
   - participation - how?
   - use of services / products - what and for what?
   - workshop
   ...

...
3) What are the three most significant activities your organisation has worked on with ISNAR?

Name of activity: |

Type of primary output:
- capacity building
- linkages
- training
- awareness
- publications
- other, what?
B) Output Categories

4) Do you have direct experience with or intimate knowledge of any of ISNAR's products or services?

a) record products / services for analysis: (√)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PRODUCTS / SERVICES</th>
<th>from 4) KNOWLEDGE/EXPERIENCE</th>
<th>from 5a) COMP. ADVANTAGE</th>
<th>from 5b) DROP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ISNAR publications</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>books</td>
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<td></td>
<td>management guidelines</td>
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<td>research reports</td>
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<td></td>
<td>briefing papers</td>
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<td>ISNAR newsletter</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ISNAR annual report</td>
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<td></td>
<td>books and articles by ISNAR staff published outside of ISNAR</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>training courses and workshops</td>
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<td></td>
<td>research seminars</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>policy seminars</td>
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<td></td>
<td>conferences</td>
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<td></td>
<td>advisory service missions</td>
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<td>diagnostic review missions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>planning missions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assistance in improving management processes</td>
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<td></td>
<td>assistance in improving agricultural research policies</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>assistance in improving NARS or NARO's organisation and structure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISNAR methods and tools</td>
<td>INFORM</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>strategic planning</td>
<td>M&amp;E</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
categories to keep in mind:
   i) in-country capacity building for research policy and management
   ii) development of regional linkages and coordination mechanisms
   iii) training workshops
   iv) awareness raising and methodology development workshops
   v) publications
5) a) For which of the products and services just mentioned do you consider ISNAR to have a comparative advantage (does it well and is needed)?
(check off in matrix under 4))

b) Are there ones it should drop and why? (check off in matrix under 4))

c) Are there ones it should take on board and why?
6) a) Would you say that ISNAR's in-country projects for strengthening NARS are:

irrelevant  somewhat relevant  highly relevant, or don’t know?

b) probe for: Why are they not relevant?
In what ways are they relevant?
7)  

a) Do ISNAR’s in-country strengthening projects produce useable outputs that have a practical application?

   not useful  somewhat useful  very useful  don’t know

b) probe for: Examples that illustrate choice of rating.
8) Does ISNAR's work (projects and products and services) help your institution fulfill its mandate?

a) record: Yes No Somewhat

b) probe for: how and in what areas?
9) Overall, would you rate the benefits of ISNAR’s work ...

a) ... to your institution as low medium high ?

b) ... towards strengthening NARS as low medium high ?
Overall Questions

10) What, in your view, is ISNAR's principal achievement over the last five years?

11) How would you assess ISNAR's effectiveness in strengthening research policy and management in NARs and what are its strengths and weaknesses in this area?
12) As far as you know, what is the reputation of ISNAR with respect to the overall quality of its work and its impact?

record: a) rating of the quality: high low medium

b) rating of the impact: high low medium

13) Has ISNAR had any important impact on NARs?

probe: if yes, what?
        if no, why not?
14) In your opinion, what is the most significant constraint ISNAR faces?

15) Do you have suggestions for removing constraints and improving the impact of ISNAR's future work?

16) Any additional comments?

Thank you for your cooperation
Appendix D

Survey Sample Selection

The interviewees for the stakeholder survey were selected from a contact list provided by ISNAR. We analysed the list in terms of geographical location, type of relationship (donor, collaborator, and other, such as members of committees etc.), and donor type. A sample of 27 interviewees was chosen to reflect the overall profile of the list. Three additional contacts were chosen for test interviews.

The sample is composed of 12 currently granting donors, 4 donors currently not funding ISNAR, 6 collaborators, and 5 others. Eight are located in the South, the rest in the North - approximately a 70/30 North - South distribution. Contacts in Africa are strongly represented reflecting ISNAR’s regional emphasis. The regional distribution is 50/25/25 for Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean, respectively. The three test interviews include one in the donor and two in the “other” categories.

This sample reflects quite closely the provided list in terms of geographical distribution and type of relationship. It covers 37% of the entities or 28% of all the contact names listed. It is slightly skewed towards Northern representation as well as towards Africa for the categories donors and others, and towards Asia and Latin America for collaborators. The sample has a slight overrepresentation of multilaterals.
Appendix E

Stakeholders Surveyed

Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)
Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research Secretariat (CGIAR Secretariat)
Czech Agrarian Chamber
Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA)
Deutsche Stiftung für Internationale Entwicklung (DSE)
Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ)
European Commission
Ford Foundation
Instituto Interamericano para la Cooperación Agrícola (IICA)
International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)
JIRCAS, Japan
Michigan State University
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The Netherlands
Overseas Development Assistance, United Kingdom (ODA)
Philippines Department of Agriculture
Royal Tropical Institute, The Netherlands (KIT)
Southern African Centre for Cooperation in Agricultural Research (SACCAR)
Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA)
Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC)
Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation, The Netherlands (CTA)
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)
World Bank (IBRD)