

Agricultural research

International centres under stress

Washington

THE Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) meets in Washington this week to decide how the 13 research centres under its control are to respond to continued financial uncertainty. Exchange rate losses caused by the increased value of the dollar, and the growing tendency of donors to support specific programmes judged to bring local benefits rather than backing core research, have meant that the heady expansion of the 1970s has been all but forgotten.

The centres had a total nominal budget last year of \$180 million, but the failure of some donors to meet in full their commitments to the centres has, for several years running, left programmes high and dry. For 1985, the CGIAR technical advisory committee is requesting a total budget of between \$187 million and \$199 million, an increase of 7-14 per cent on the current year, but actual reductions in 1985 are not impossible. The traditional supporters of CGIAR — of which the United States is the largest — are under internal pressure to restrict multilateral aid in favour of support for bilateral projects, whereas the newer donors have not yet been able to make a substantial impact. The World Bank remains the donor of last resort, paying the bills that others have failed to meet.

The Rockefeller Foundation, which founded the first of the agricultural research centres (for breeding wheat, in Mexico) and the Ford Foundation, a substantial sponsor from its early days, have been reducing their contributions to the centres in recent years. Rockefeller is turning instead to centres outside the CGIAR system and is to announce a major initiative in plant cellular and molecular biology before the end of the year, probably based in Mexico. The budget will be in the region of \$5 million a year, but already some are asking whether the Rockefeller Foundation will be able to recruit to Mexico enough high-calibre scientists to justify this outlay.

Despite the financial uncertainty, CGIAR appears confident that most of the centres are still doing a good job. But there is frustration over the plight of some African centres, which have to work with often under-developed national programmes. Local interests seek to direct research efforts towards strictly local problems, an approach which CGIAR feels to be unproductive in the long term. The centres which have historically been the most effective seem to be those with a strictly defined mandate, whereas attempts at some centres to work on a number of different local problems are held to have been less productive.

The International Centre for Agricultural Research in Dry Areas, in Syria, and

the International Livestock Centre for Africa, in Ethiopia, are likely to come under particular scrutiny this week, and there may be attempts to tighten up their programmes. Particular attention will also be paid to the West Africa Rice Development Association (WARDA) in Liberia, which has been under heavy criticism. The future of WARDA within the CGIAR system appears still to be open to doubt, despite some attempts at reform by the WARDA management.

CGIAR has at various times been criticized for advancing the careers of scientists

rather than the fortunes of the developing countries it is intended to benefit. The criticism is apparently taken seriously, to judge from the number of introspective studies by CGIAR now in progress. Should its centres, for example, try to stand in place of national agricultural development programmes where these are seen to be inadequate? There was some agreement in preliminary discussions last week that centres in different parts of the world should be ready to adapt their strategies to local circumstances despite the dangers. There was also an agreement to adopt a plan to foster cooperation between the various institutes, including a joint training programme in farming systems research.

Tim Beardsley

Early success a problem for CGIAR

Washington

THE international research centres supported by CGIAR stem from a crop improvement programme undertaken in the 1940s by the Mexican government and the Rockefeller Foundation. So successful was the project that in 1959 Rockefeller joined forces with the Ford Foundation to establish the first international agricultural research centre, the International Rice Research Centre in the Philippines. In 1966 the two foundations sponsored the second centre, Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo (CIMMYT) in Mexico, with two more centres following the next year.

By the late 1960s Rockefeller and Ford were each contributing \$3 million annually to the centres, and it became clear they could support no further expansion. In 1971 CGIAR was created at the suggestion of the World Bank to coordinate finances of the centres, which now number 13 in all.

CGIAR, which has a full-time secretariat provided by the World Bank in Washington, remains a completely informal organization with no constitution or charter: its decisions are reached only by consensus among its members.

Funding has changed drastically over the past decade. The US Agency for International Development is now the largest contributor (\$44.5 million in 1983), followed by the World Bank (\$19 million). The International Development Bank contributed \$8 million. The Rockefeller and Ford Foundations have both decreased their contributions recently together accounting for less than \$2 million last year.

But the difficulty for CGIAR now seems to be in living up to the early successes of the first institutes: by the late 1970s Mexican wheat was grown on 29 million hectares of land worldwide, and improved rice strains on 25 million hectares.

Tim Beardsley

Nature index of biotechnology stocks

| 12-Month high | 12-Month low | Company | Close previous month | Close 26 October | Change |
|---------------|--------------|------------------------------|----------------------|------------------|--------|
| 14 | 6 | Biogen (Switzerland) | 8 | 7 | -1 |
| 2 | 1 | Bio-Logicals (Canada) | 1½ | 1 5/16 | +1/16 |
| 14 3/8 | 5 1/8 | Bio-Response (USA) | 7¾ | 6 | -1¾ |
| 14 | 9¼ | Cetus (USA) | 11 | 10¼ | -¾ |
| 10 3/8 | 4¼ | Collaborative Research (USA) | 5 5/8 | 4½ | -1 1/8 |
| 19 7/8 | 11 ½ | Damon (USA) | 14 3/8 | 12 1/8 | -2 ½ |
| 26¼ | 11¾ | Enzo-Biochem (USA) | 14½ | 18¼ | +3¾ |
| 10 1/8 | 4 | Flow General (USA) | 5¼ | 4 7/8 | -¾ |
| 42¼ | 28¾ | Genentech (USA) | 30¼ | 9 7/8 | -1 7/8 |
| 10¾ | 4½ | Genetic Systems (USA) | 6¼ | 6½ | -¼ |
| 17¼ | 6¾ | Genex (USA) | 9¾ | 7 1/8 | -2 5/8 |
| 23 | 11 | Hybritech (USA) | 13¼ | 15¾ | +2½ |
| 16¼ | 6¼ | Molecular Genetics (USA) | 7¾ | 7 | -¾ |
| 15½ | 8¼ | Monoclonal Antibodies (USA) | 10¾ | 10½ | -¼ |
| 60 7/8 | 20 7/8 | Novo Industri A/S (Denmark) | 33 3/8 | 20 7/8 | -12½ |
| 22¾ | 14½ | Pharmacia (Sweden) | 17 7/8 | 16¼ | -1 5/8 |

Closing prices are for the last Friday of the month. For over-the-counter stocks, bid price is quoted; for stocks on the American and New York exchanges, the transaction price. *Nature's* weighted index of biotechnology stocks stood at 121 on 26 October, compared with 139 a month earlier. Data from E.F. Hutton, Inc.