

Letter by Robert T. Watson, director of the IAASTD, to Bureau Members and Donors regarding the independent evaluation of the IAASTD commissioned by the World Bank to Howard Elliot, August 2009

Dear Donors and Bureau members:

I would like to put on the record that the secretariat, co-chairs of the IAASTD and myself as director of the IAASTD are disappointed with the independent evaluation of the IAASTD conducted by Howard Elliot. The following comments are mine, but are consistent with the concerns of the co-chairs and other secretariat members.

While the assessment does give credit to the IAASTD in a number of ways, in general the assessment has the glass half empty rather than half full.

The evaluation contains a number of inaccuracies that the secretariat and I brought to Howard's attention but were not corrected. The anecdotal style of the evaluation report does not provide a constructive evaluation, which could be useful to donors or others who may want to learn lessons from the IAASTD exercise or take actions on its findings in the future.

The evaluation does credit the IAASTD in:

- providing a very significant step in the crucial work of identifying and addressing the structural roots of the global food crisis, as well as in paving the way to design more sustainable food systems for the 21st century;
- informing the debate on the diversity of agricultural development paradigms and their relationship to policy analysis of poverty reduction and food insecurity that has been postponed for too many years;
- developing a unique governance structure for the IAASTD, i.e., a hybrid between an intergovernmental process, *ala* the IPCC, and a non-governmental process, *ala* the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which provided a forum for debate and discussion amongst a wide range of stakeholders (academia, the private and NGO sectors, and government). Indeed, the evaluation noted that the unique governance structure was a social experiment (at least in the view of myself as director); and
- having an effective secretariat and completing the global and sub-global assessments in a timely manner.

However, the evaluation overly criticized the IAASTD (amplified below):

- by stating that there had been a significant turn-over in authors making it difficult to stay focused on the key concepts, definitions and practices and chapter storylines, and that there was inadequate author representation at the final plenary;
- for the Bureau dropping the plausible futures section, undermining the forward-looking element of the assessment. While it is true the plausible futures construct was dropped, it was replaced with an alternate approach to assessing future challenges;
- for lacking a formal outreach and communication strategy, which should have been produced by a Bureau sub-committee, thus implying that the IAASTD did not have an adequate strategy. While it is true that the Bureau sub-committee did not produce a formal outreach and communication strategy, the issue was discussed at each Bureau meeting, and there has been a very successful outreach and communication strategy since the IAASTD was finalized and approved; and there is plenty of evidence that the IAASTD is being now being used in multiple policy fora;
- because the full reports will not be available on the web until six months after publication, but should have recognized that the most important reports, i.e., the executive summaries of the global, sub-global and synthesis reports were available immediately after the plenary;
- for not employing facilitators and more formal dispute resolution processes. I strongly disagree with this finding, as the same procedures that worked for both the IPCC and the MA were both appropriate and used successfully in the IAASTD; and
- for the lack of honoraria or travel expenses for some developed countries experts, which did

preclude the involvement of some experts who would have otherwise participated. However, the majority of all of experts asked to participate as authors or review editors agreed, hence the criticism that the IAASTD could not attract the best experts is overstated.

1. Mischaracterization of author resignations and participation in the final plenary:

The evaluation team has inflated the number of authors who left the process and conflated contributing authors (not selected by Bureau and did not attend meetings) with lead authors (selected by Bureau and attended more than half of meetings). There was not much turn-over and the few authors that did drop out for reasons ranging from insufficient time to changes in professional capacity did not affect 'agreement on, or use of, the key concepts (e.g., the conceptual framework), definitions and practices, etc., which were agreed in design team meetings prior to chapter team meetings.

The evaluation criticized the limited number of authors invited to the final plenary meeting where the reports were debated and approved. We adopted the approach of the IPCC and MA, where-by a limited number of authors from each chapter of each report, i.e., the global, five sub-global and synthesis reports, were invited to participate in the closing Plenary, consistent with the requirement to defend the draft assessment findings and modify the findings as appropriate. While more authors would have liked to have been invited, the additional costs could not be justified.

2. The implications of the Bureau decision to drop the plausible futures section:

There were substantive comments during the peer-review process that questioned the values and assumptions underlying scenario development. Based on the peer-review comments, Bureau members, almost unanimously, requested removal of the scenarios at a Bureau meeting in San Jose after a daylong discussion of the validity and policy relevance of the policy scenarios. I agree that the process of eliminating the plausible futures construct without allowing time for the authors to respond to the criticisms was not ideal, but the Bureau did not believe that the approach was not policy relevant. The authors then developed a more straight-forward approach to assessing future challenges and opportunities that was approved by the Bureau.

3. Outreach and communications and web access to the full reports

This is often perceived to be a weak link in assessments where there is no long-term commitment to a secretariat. However, the IAASTD did, both at the global and local/subglobal levels, focus on this and whereas it certainly could have been more structured, and possibly, better coordinated and delivered -- Hans, Judi and I have been at a number of highly visible national, regional and global fora (e.g., CSD 17, UNEP Governing Council, African High-Level Ministerial, European Commission, etc.) where IAASTD has received significant attention (ministerial United Nations meetings, ministerial UN agency meetings, ministerial environmental convention meetings, national government meetings, e.g., US Congress, UK parliament). Authors and others have participated in about 80-100 local/national/subglobal events since the plenary - this is significantly more than the MA and probably comparable to the IPCC.

To amplify, I alone have now given plenary presentations at Ministerial meetings including UNESOC, CSD, CBD, UNEP, Madrid high-level meeting on food security, and UK Parliament), and dozens of scientific and private sector conferences. It was interesting to note that at the recent CSD meeting in New York, which focused on food security, the key findings of the IAASTD were repeatedly re-iterated by delegation after delegation, e.g., small-scale farmers are critical to food security in many developing countries; the role of women is critical; there is a need to assess a whole range of agro-ecological practices by sustainability criteria; that the farmer must be in the middle when deciding research priorities and participatory research is critical; that investments in research need to be increased; that extension services need to be reformed; that climate change is a critical threat to food security; a recognition of the different policy needs of resource rich and resource poor farmers; and the policy challenges posed by the concentration of control and the distribution of benefits in global agricultural value added chains, etc. Clearly the issues raised in the IAASTD are now resonating with representatives from both developed and developing countries, and there is plenty of evidence that the IAASTD is being now being used in multiple policy fora – not an impression you would get from reading the evaluation.

On Access to the Reports - I am also concerned that the full report was not online immediately following

publication - but this was a condition imposed by the publisher – unfortunately we had no control over the decision given only one publisher bid. However, four items bear noting which do not come through clearly enough in the evaluation report. Namely: (i) The Summaries for Decision Makers of the Global and Sub-Global Reports; and the Executive Summary of Synthesis Report have been available on line since they were finalized; (ii) we bought back a significant number of reports to ensure wide distribution free of charge and copies of the report have been distributed to Governments, participants in the process (i.e. authors, review editors, and Bureau members); (iii) the Summaries for Decision Makers are on line in all six UN languages (i.e. Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Spanish, Russian) to ensure wide dissemination; and (iv) the entire report will soon be available on CD-ROM free of charge.

4. Conflict resolution procedures and professional facilitation

I disagree with the evaluation that a more formal conflict resolution process would have prevented two private sector authors from resigning and three governments (Australia, Canada and the US) from not formally approving the reports, hence I disagree that future endeavors need procedures different from other international assessments, e.g., the IPCC. The procedures used for the IAASTD were very successful in resolving most of the issues – differences of opinion were resolved by checking the evidence base through independent review editors as in the IPCC and MA. Conflicts were dealt with through discussions with authors and where a resolution could not be reached the authors noted the lack of unanimity. In the experience of the Director, Chairs and Secretariat, author interactions were characterized by civility and an impressive ability to listen to one another.

There are underlying reasons why the two authors did what they did and I doubt whether a more formal conflict resolution system would have made any difference – an assessment is not a political document where lowest common denominator language is used to keep everybody happy. The fact that two private sector authors and Crop life withdrew their support shows their lack of commitment to the formal process of conflict resolution outlined in the IAASTD Principles and Procedures, when others who disagreed with some of the draft text stayed engaged.

The Bureau did debate utilizing a formal professional facilitation process and decided against it for the reason that authors, along with independent review editors, should be able to work together and take ownership of the outcomes (it should be noted that the IPCC, MA, GBA and international ozone assessments also came to a similar conclusion). Professional facilitation sometimes derails the process by taking away from the authors the responsibility of such ownership. However, this is an aspect to be explored in the future.

In summary, I maintain that:

- the IAASTD was both timely and effective in contributing to current global food security and poverty reduction policy debates and action;
- taking a broad perspective and placing agriculture and agricultural S&T within the global energy, trade and climate change debates was appropriate and timely;
- a lot was learned from the IAASTD process and it provided a forum in which people of different disciplines, stakeholder groups and vested interests had voice and collaborated effectively;
- while not all countries approved the final IAASTD reports it did provide an important platform for dialogue and further study;
- the IAASTD complemented and built upon the excellent IPCC and MA reports, which addressed only a limited number of aspects of agriculture and food security;
- the World Bank's Agriculture WDR and the IAASTD report may be read as complementary – the composition of the authorship is quite different with the IAASTD having many more social researchers who focus on poverty reduction and development issues and the special needs of small-scale farmers; and
- governments need to decide, in concert with other stakeholders whether there needs to be a follow-up to the IAASTD, and if so decide on the scope, management and governance. In this they need to recognize the power and privilege of a wide range of interest groups and develop robust, practical democratic principles and procedures suitable to the occasion.