

Business Plans in ICRAF for Regional Coordinators, Unit Leaders, and Programme Managers

DDG-P Guideline No. 1 – Series 2004

(version 19 May 2004)

This is to provide suggestions on how ICRAF's regional coordinators, unit heads, and program/project managers can develop their business plans. Here the context is the near-term (1-2 years). A long-term strategy peers into the distant future to predict what we want to do and become several years ahead. This can be a valuable exercise when done well. However, the guidelines which follow are focused on near-term operational considerations. What are your intentions and organizational aims for the projects and resources within your current mandate?

While we wouldn't want all of them to be alike, we should expect that each business plan will address a minimum set of dimensions (i.e., questions and topics). Here we propose to define these dimensions, encouraging each planner (or planning team) to address them in some form and at some level. You are free in terms of how you frame, order, aggregate, and disaggregate the critical issues. But when you finish the exercise, you should have satisfactorily addressed each of the four **bold-headed** dimensions below.

Most business plans are developed through teamwork and open forums in order to establish a shared framework of values, concerns, and directions. Most business plans also have a more confidential aspect in matters of personnel change and other sensitive topics.

Thus in ICRAF, we expect a team approach for Sections #1 ("**Accomplishments**") and #2 ("**Targets and Benchmarks**") below. The Regional Coordinator (or Unit Leader, Programme Manager) should develop Section #3 ("**Finance**") through a team effort in the beginning, followed by an executive over-write to follow. Section #4 ("**Re-Balancing**") is normally too delicate for a team approach, and needs to be handled in an executive manner.

1. Summary of Accomplishments in the Past 1-2 Years

Method: This is suitable for a team approach, possibly a “brainstorm” on what’s been achieved. After all, how can you know where you’re going until you determine where you’ve been? Different individuals will bring varied perspectives. Depending on whether you can manage it smoothly, you should consider inviting your partner organizations to participate with you on this step.

You can divide the summary of accomplishments and deficiencies by projects, countries, thematic areas, or any other helpful units of analysis.

All observations should be recorded, and the Regional Coordinator (Unit Leader, Programme Manager) will then organize and summarize the results into concise terms. This exercise to state achievements can be a first stage before the rest of the business planning goes forward.

By reflecting on what’s been done (and not done) recently, you begin with an overview and high points. Your mind sorts out what is important and what is not. What are your criteria and indicators for “accomplishments”? The answer to that is a bedrock element of the thinking that you have to define for yourself.

At its most fundamental level, ICRAF is intending to create positive developmental impact. Impact has associated with it aspects of scientific advance (including but not limited to high-quality publications and related “outputs”), development of germplasm as a resource, institutional capacity building, positive influence of others’ agendas, contributions to policy advances, and so on. So how do you assess your region’s contributions along the multiple lines of impact that are relevant in your unique situation? Do you explain these contributions in terms of ICRAF’s Medium-Term Plan (MTP), linking to our four ICRAF themes?

While we almost never witness impacts directly, what we account for are our deliberate inputs towards those ends. So if you are unable to tackle impact directly, then please focus on what you have done recently to create it (i.e., how you have set the stage for impact to occur).

This discussion is more than inventorying the number of papers written and workshops convened. You must think long and hard about the qualitative and often intangible attributes of what you’ve been doing. Moreover, you should not fear stating failures and deficiencies – if you do not report having them, then you cannot be believed. The region or programme that can be open and objective about its shortcomings is a region that is positioned to grow.

To become highly practical about it, try to state accomplishments (and deficiencies) by ICRAF project, country teams, and other smaller units of analysis. The focus on specific projects and countries can add clarity to what otherwise would be too complicated to consider at a regional scale.

2. Targets and Benchmarks (Progress Indicators) for Next 1-2 Years

Method: Like Section #1 on Accomplishments, the establishment of Benchmarks is suitable for a team approach. Different individuals will bring varied perspectives. Depending on whether you can manage it smoothly, you should consider inviting your partner organizations to participate with you on this step. You may want to start this group process by identifying Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (S-W-O-T).

Benchmarks have to be actually achievable, and they have to directly relate to your main issues rather than going into abstract directions. The challenge is to keep the discussion focused in relation to recent achievements and deficiencies. All observations should be recorded, and the Regional Coordinator or his delegate will then organize and summarize the results into concise terms.

Our work in ICRAF is always goal-oriented, and so you need to determine where you're intending to go. In light of recent accomplishments (i.e., summarized in the preceding section), what aspects will you improve and strengthen? These are your targets. That is, what do you propose in order to achieve higher impact as you go forward? This should not turn into a fanciful wish list or a hollow essay. Rather, what can you and should you realistically achieve?

It helps to facilitate discussion if you can break this down into component areas: e.g., targets and benchmarks in research and publishing; targets and benchmarks in outreach and communications; targets and benchmarks in training and capacity building; targets and benchmarks related to germplasm, targets and benchmarks for office administration; targets and benchmarks for fund raising, and so on. The Regional Coordinator (Unit Leader, Programme Manager) draws up these categories at the outset, and then asks her/his team to refine and add to them.

Thinking about targets and benchmarks will obligate you to fast-forward into specific elements of finance, personnel, geographical sites, and thematic areas – as follows in Sections #3 and #4.

3. Finance

Method: On this you have an opportunity for a team approach in terms of collecting the views of many individuals on the main questions. However, the Regional Coordinator (Unit Leader, Programme Manager) will have to follow the collective discussion with an executive synopsis of what is to be done. This may be controversial, especially the scenarios of reduced funding, implying that this section does not circulate to everyone.

Like the other CGIAR centers, ICRAF is entrepreneurial. While we complain about the pressures of getting funds, many in ICRAF seem to thrive on the challenge of raising

money. Moreover, successful grants generate professional pride and reward for those who are fortunate to obtain this funding.

Surely a major element in your strategic thinking is therefore how to seek the funding to do what you intend. Among the questions for you to answer are: What will I do this year that I didn't do last year in terms of enhancing my position and capacity to raise more funds? What is my approach to reduce my dependence on increasingly scarce core (unrestricted) funds and replace them with project-financed (restricted) funds? Related to that, what is my target ratio of restricted/core monies for next year compared with now? What should I do differently, if anything, to improve how I develop and manage my region's project pipeline? What should I do differently, if anything, to improve how I obtain intelligence about donors and the projects they support?

Every region needs a contingency plan for larger and smaller amounts of funds than you anticipate getting. If you should adversely encounter a cut of 20% in your funds for next year, what is your strategy to accommodate the shortfall (short and long terms)? And if you should fortuitously come into an increase of 20% in your funds, how will you most productively utilize them (short and long terms)? These scenarios should be carefully developed not as a theoretical exercise, but rather as genuine managerial anticipation of how you will respond to reality.

One ICRAF region (Southern Africa) prepares an annual Plan of Work and Budget (POWB) which shows a matrix of projects and their budgets. The POWB has the character of a logical framework (outputs, indicators, outcomes, etc.). Normally, the POWB should parallel the thinking and development that goes into the financial component of your regional business plan. The strategy leads, and the POWB follows.

4. Re-Balancing Personnel, Geographical Sites, and Thematic Areas

Method: This aspect is not generally suitable for team work. It probes difficult trade-offs, and is best done by the Regional Coordinator, Unit Leader, or Programme Manager working alone or with carefully chosen close advisors. This section of the strategic plan does not circulate.

Each regional coordinator, unit leader, and programme manager is a juggler of staff, project themes, and countries/sites in which to work. None of these aspects is intelligently addressed alone. Rather, the three are tightly interconnected and should be considered simultaneously.

What is your mix of people, geography, and themes at present -- and what is less than satisfactory about it? How do you propose to change that mix in order to get into position for greater impact?

Probably none of the ICRAF regions or programmes has a stable equilibrium where all of this is in perfect balance. On the contrary, each region and programme is likely to have a concept of itself "improved" in the near future compared with the present. What will

that take – and can you tie in your vision of improvement with your financial dimension? In other words, you need to make your vision compatible with your anticipated budget – perhaps again according to different scenarios and your expectations regarding which among those scenarios are most likely to occur.

This final section of the business plan has to be done after deep reflection. It is the capstone of what strategy is all about, and merits your most careful attention. It is also the platform for your interactions with Senior Leadership on how you see the future developing. This is another reason for investing conscientiously in doing it well.

Annex: A Checklist for ICRAF Business Plans

Preparing and Planning

- You do the business plan as a unified exercise, but you design it into phases which are team-oriented vs. phases which you handle alone as an executive. This also means that you plan on making an optional public document of some parts of the business plan, while holding other parts mainly confidential (not circulating).
- You consider using an outside facilitator in cases where that may be desirable for objectivity, wide team participation, and conveying seriousness to your team and partners.
- You are familiar with SWOT methods (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) – and you employ SWOT effectively for aspects of the team-based participation.
- You frequently use the question: “If we are successful, then how will ‘X’ act differently?” The ‘X’ can be farmers, NGOs, governments, students, and so on. This question is a way to approach the complicated topic of desired impact.
- You frame your business plan in relation to ICRAF’s Medium-Term Plan, the theme strategies, and other elements of ICRAF’s framework for planning, budgeting, and reporting.
- You are able to take long lists of “to do” and narrow them into priorities and phases. A main challenge is that your team members will invariably identify too many “priorities.” What will be your approach to realistically and objectively reduce long lists into truly actionable items? If you are unable to narrow and prioritize, you are unable to develop a true strategy.

Component on Accomplishments

- Accomplishments recognize and make explicit reference to achievements with research and publications (“global public goods” in CG parlance); germplasm;

- capacity building; policy agendas; and other dimensions of impact unique to your region but shared in terms of aims by all International Agricultural Research Centres.
- Accomplishments recognize and are explicit about both direct and indirect contributions (impact pathways).
 - Some achievements are quantitative and others are qualitative, and both categories should be appropriately represented in your business plan.
 - Accomplishments properly reflect and account for the time dimension (i.e., short vs. longer-term impacts).
 - They are neither exaggerated nor too modest (i.e., objectivity matters). Failures and shortcomings are presented openly and without embarrassment.
 - The discussion of accomplishments attempts to attribute successes and deficiencies to their root sources and explanations.

Component on Targets and Benchmarks (Progress Indicators)

- Benchmarks are referenced to the successes and failures of the previous section on accomplishments (i.e., benchmarks go forward from the recent past; they are never invented *de novo* as if there is no history).
- Benchmarks are not fuzzy and abstract. On the contrary, they are sufficiently clear to be easily understood by everybody.
- Your benchmarks for the region tie into your planned assignments of personnel, operational support, and other tangible resources at your disposal.
- When your benchmarks are well conceptualized, they help you identify performance targets for the individuals in your team. Likewise, individual performance targets (i.e., in work plans) should be referenced to benchmarks in the regional strategy.
- Whenever possible, benchmarks are stated quantitatively and in relation to a timeline.
- Benchmarks can be about doing or having less of something: they are not always about doing or having more. Examples: fewer unproductive workshops, fewer but stronger partners, and so on. What can you do less of and feel good about it?
- Progress towards benchmarks should be monitored: you must be able to observe if you are meeting your targets.

- Accountability is key: who is responsible for what benchmarks? Yours is a team effort, but specified individuals and combinations of them are held responsible for particular intended accomplishments. Please insure that your strategy inserts the names of your team members for each actionable item – giving them the authority and resources to accompany the responsibility.

Component on Finance

- Your pipeline of potential future financial sources (projects) is developed and shared within your team, and everybody has an understanding of it.
- Your strategic thinking on how to improve intelligence about donors and the projects they support is developed and shared within your team, and everybody has an understanding of that.
- Financial projections are presented as an integral part of the strategic planning, with written notes to explain all assumptions and calculations.
- Your financial projections are linked to the present, i.e., you are able to identify what will stay the same and what will change.
- You do not present just one projection, but instead develop realistic optimistic and pessimistic scenarios (e.g., + and – 20% from “most probable”).
- Discussions of finance emphasize the difference between core vs. restricted funds, e.g., making reference to the restricted/core ratio in your region, and stating the strategy for how you will increase that ratio (i.e., substituting project funds for core funds).
- Your strategy assures that all of your current personnel are financially “covered” for the year.
- Your financial strategy leads into doing a Plan of Work and Budget (POWB) in those regions which employ the POWB as a management tool.
- Pessimistic financial scenarios do not circulate; they remain with the Regional Coordinator and are shared with Senior Leadership.

Component on Personnel, Geographical Sites, and Thematic Areas

- These three dimensions are inter-related, and your strategy considers all three together.

- The strategy is explicit about any deficiencies in the mix of people, sites, and themes – and is realistic in presenting and explaining how you believe that an “improved” situation can be achieved.
- Because the region’s professional and support staff are your most valuable resource, the strategy puts considerable emphasis on personnel aspects.
- The strategy includes a vision (a practical one) of what your personnel needs are likely to be in the future, and indicates possible pathways (including financial requirements and sources) to get there.
- The strategy includes attention to country-level and theme-level sub strategies, where those are relevant considerations.
- Because of sensitivities on personnel matters and other delicate trade-offs, this part of the business plan does not circulate. It remains with the Regional Coordinator and is shared with Senior Leadership.