Generation
Cultivating Plant Diversity for the Resource-Poor

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Prof. James O. Ochanda
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International Livestock Research Institute
Nairobi, Kenya

Dear Prof Ochanda,

This is part one of our follow-up on the meetings carried out by the Generation Challenge Program (myself, Jonathan Crouch and Carmen de Vicente) with you, Andres Binder and John McDermott last week on our proposal to establish ***a joint regional initiative on plant genomics research and capacity building*** and fund raising efforts to support them. We will send you another letter next week on our proposal for creating a joint regional molecular breeding community of practice supported by an annual marker-assisted selection training course.

The ***Generation Challenge Program*** is a new CGIAR-launched global initiative to use comparative genomics to unlock the value in genetic diversity for crop improvement. This program currently receives about $8M per year from the World Bank and the European Union. Our consortium comprises 8 CGIAR centers, 4 ARIs and 2 NARS although other institutions are able to access these funds through our competitive grants program. These funds are largely earmarked for research projects but with a significant emphasis on capacity building, in the following areas:

	Sub-Program Title (Sub-Program Leader - host institution)
SP1	Genetic Diversity of Global Genetic Resources (Jean-Christophe Glaszmann – CIRAD)
SP2	Comparative Genomics for Gene Discovery (Hei Leung – IRRI)
SP3	Trait Capture for Crop Improvement (Jonathan Crouch – ICRISAT)
SP4	Genetic Resources, Genomic, and Crop Information Systems (Theo van Hintum - WUR)
SP5	Capacity Building (Carmen de Vicente – IPGRI)

For more detailed information please visit our website at www.generationCP.org

The challenge program (CP) aspires to champion a new architecture of innovation for agricultural development based on creating new collaborative projects linking ARIs, IARCs and NARS to provide systemic teams stretching from innovation to product delivery and impact. In this context we are particularly excited about the opportunities opening up through the NEPAD Biosciences initiative to be hosted by ILRI. We believe that that the goals of these two programs

are highly congruent in certain aspects whilst being highly complementary in others, providing rich opportunities for win-win synergies:

- ***Synergizing complementary and compatible mandates:*** the CP focuses on the comparative biology of CGIAR mandate crops with a global scope for crop improvement for the resource poor whilst East Africa Biosciences carries a much broader biosciences scope but focuses on the important issues for the immediate region.

- ***Joint capacity building and product delivery activities:*** both initiatives need to establish strategic partnerships to ensure delivery and impact of their science innovation outputs in East Africa, which in many cases may be more efficiently achieved through coordinated/ joint activities. For example, our proposal for a joint annual marker-assisted selection training course.

- ***Augmenting complementary funding bases:*** both initiatives have a strong desire to expand their funding base for both research projects and capacity building activities.

It is apparent that these two initiatives can jointly advance their respective programs by establishing a formal alliance to generate joint proposals for targeted fund raising efforts. One could envisage various mechanisms by which we could implement this. For example, funds raised in this way could be administered by the challenge program based on a set of jointly established criteria. This might then take the form of a specific component of the challenge program perhaps called the "African Biosciences Flagship Program". Projects in this program could be predominantly implemented by NARS scientist carrying out critical upstream activities at the Biosciences facility, other activities being carried out in their host institution, which would also play a critical role in national infrastructural development and product delivery.

There are several common themes between the priority areas of ASARECA, AATF and Generation CP, which might be suitable focal areas for the proposed joint Biosciences-CP program on research and capacity building. We would like to draft short concept notes in these areas during May, which the Biosciences Implementation Group might like to consider jointly developing. These could serve as examples in the Biosciences business plan of potential fund raising areas for the Biosciences initiative. The most compelling common research priority appears to be the development of host plant solutions to drought and low soil fertility, although the inclusion of developing host plant resistance to insect pests and mycotoxins might also be considered. The driving criteria for the challenge program is a focus on traits that are important across crop groups for which a comparative biology approach would offer significant leverage. It is notable that five of the nine theme areas highlighted in the "Priority Setting Report for the ASARECA Biotechnology Initiative, September 2003" are directly congruent with the founding pillars of the CP:

#2: New genes, markers and related protocols from characterizing crops, livestock and pathogens
#3: Improving accessibility to genes, novel germplasm and biotechnologies
#5: Strengthening human resources and infrastructure to achieve goals in agricultural biotechnology
#7: Characterization, evaluation and conservation of crop, animal and soil organism genetic variation in the region
#9: Develop pathways for delivery of biotechnology

Providing you believe the above proposal is a reasonable approach, we would like to develop proposals in three distinct areas: plant transgenics, plant genomics and capacity building. If you agree, we would like to take these concept notes to donors during June-September to gain preliminary feedback on their interest and relevance.

This proposed relationship between the Generation CP and the Biosciences initiative does not affect ongoing or future relationships between CP consortium members and the Biosciences initiative. Nor would it affect the Biosciences relationship with any other institution or organization. In all cases, we envisage a wide array of additional bilateral partnerships. However, this is simply an attempt to raise the game for bioscience research funding in the region for mutual gain for all challenge program and bioscience stakeholders.

We would be most grateful if you could present this idea to the biosciences implementation group and relay to us their feedback as soon as possible.

Many thanks for your time and we look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes

Dr Robert S. Zeigler
Director, Generational Challenge Program

cc: Carlos Sere, John McDermott, Andres Binder, Jonathan Crouch, Carmen de Vicente