

# Maximizing Library Resources through Consortial Subscriptions: the Case of the CGIAR LIS Consortium

by

**Mila M. Ramos<sup>1</sup>, and Kamsiah Mohd Ali<sup>2</sup>**

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## Abstract

In the electronic age, the need for collaboration is prompted by the nature and quality of electronic information, improved information users' ability to manipulate computers, better competencies of information providers, the available ICT infrastructure, the continually increasing cost of information sources and the diminishing financial resources. To cope with the need to provide more information with less resources, the information management professionals (IMs) of the 15 Future Harvest Centers of Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) established a consortium in 2002. Earlier, the libraries in the CGIAR system have been collaborating informally through interlibrary loans, conventional document delivery, creation of a union list of serials, access to each other's databases, and consultations. The CGIAR LIS (Libraries and Information Services) Consortium brought collaboration to a higher and more efficient level. Some major achievements include better recognition of IMs, improved electronic document delivery, joint journal and databases subscriptions, creation of a portal page, sharing of best practices in information management, and cost savings for the entire system. This paper will discuss the activities of the CGIAR LIS, with emphasis on joint journal subscriptions, and how it enabled better access to information, while maximizing the limited financial resources of libraries in the CGIAR system.

## Introduction

In this electronic age, the sophisticated technological environment is envisioned to add value to information resources and information professionals and to sustain them as vital components of the work of their organization (Barreau, 2004). This optimism, however, is dimmed by budgetary pressures. With diminishing resources, it is rarely possible for a library or information center to have enough resources to fulfill the needs of clients. What is being delivered is only a portion of what clients actually need.

Collaboration is widely recognized as the best way of coping with budgetary constraints. While before, interlibrary cooperation took place informally, nowadays, there is an increased move towards the formal organization of consortia. Several catalysts are responsible for the renaissance of collaborative initiatives (Allmand, 2001):

- Volume, Nature and Quality of Information. Recent advances in information and communication technology have radically transformed the volume, format, and quality of information sources
- User Needs and Expectations. These were altered by improved users' competence in manipulating sophisticated automation infrastructure.
- ICT Competencies. The improved competencies of information providers and the ability to utilize remote sources via computers have altered their capability to deliver information.
- ICT Infrastructure. More sophisticated ICT infrastructure facilitated the means of sharing resources regardless of geographic location.
- Geometric increase in the cost of information sources. Prices have gone up by leaps and bounds.
- Relevance. For libraries, membership in a consortium is recognized as an effective vehicle for competitiveness.
- Eroding Budget. Consortia provide cost-effective library access to journals and databases.

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<sup>1</sup> Head Librarian, International Rice Research Institute, Los Baños, Laguna, Philippines

<sup>2</sup> Information Services Manager, WorldFish Center, Penang, Malaysia

These factors created the urgent need to adopt a strategy wherein information can be linked efficiently to potential users, a goal that cannot be reached by an institution working alone or depending solely on its resources. The consortium enables members to expand and enhance their collections through access to and delivery of materials owned by other research institutions within the system.

### **The Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR )**

The CGIAR was established in 1971 to “contribute to food security and poverty eradication in developing countries through research, partnerships, capacity building, and policy support, promoting sustainable agricultural development based on the environmentally sound management of natural resources”. It supports 15 (formerly there were 16) centers, with about 8,500 scientists and scientific staff working in more than 100 countries (CGIAR online, 2004). Each center is autonomous, with a charter, board of trustees, budget, and staff of its own. Directed by diverse humanitarian mandates, the centers generate knowledge and make available pertinent information for dissemination to end-users: the CGIAR staff, scientists in partner organizations and in the national agricultural research systems (NARS) as well as private organizations around the world.

Over time, many CG centers are allocating smaller percentages of their general expenditure on their libraries. The scientific staff, with the newly acquired prowess and facility with the use of IT infrastructure, expects librarians to continue obtaining new electronic resources while simultaneously maintaining the print collection until the electronic resources collection is stable. Researchers expect more information to be delivered faster and better with no additional funding.

### **Birth of the CGIAR Libraries and Information Services consortium (CGIAR LISC)**

Faced with the various constraints mentioned above, the information management professionals (IMs) of the CGIAR resorted to close collaboration to make up for budgetary shortfalls. In the past, cooperation was accomplished through occasional meetings, interlibrary loans, creation of a union list of serials, and conventional document delivery via snail mail (Allmand, 2002).

With automation, geographical locations no longer pose a barrier for interlibrary collaboration. A listserv was created as early as 1999 for regular remote communication among IMs in the system. Membership in the listserv needs the approval of all the members. Mutual trust, group enthusiasm and the urgent need to deliver more with fewer resources were the moving forces behind this community of practice.

In 2002, the IMs committed themselves formally through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by all center Directors and the CGIAR Secretariat to pursue the following objectives (CGIAR, 2002):

- “Share resources and knowledge, such as joint journal subscriptions, document delivery services, content, expertise, technologies, and processes;
- Facilitate access to information held at all CG Centers by Center staff and partners particularly those located in the poorest countries of the world;
- Contribute to the dissemination of CGIAR research output;
- Implement the intended collaboration by jointly developing and executing projects within the CGIAR and in collaboration with other institutions and partners (e.g. FAO, USDA-AgNIC, scientific publishers) and through other initiatives;
- Exchange best practices in knowledge and information management.”

Now the center libraries act as a unified body and not as separate entities in support of research to transform world agricultural production.

### **SOME MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS**

Some of the major accomplishments of the consortium in its almost 3 years of existence are (Alvare, 2003; Umbima, 2004):

- Better and improved image of IMs in the system
- Financial and organizational support received from Organizational Challenge Program (OCP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Two meetings of the community were held in 2001 and 2003 with grants from these agencies.
- Development and maintenance of a common gateway, the CGIAR portal page<sup>3</sup>, for access to all CGIAR library resources (hosted by the CGIAR Secretariat).
- A union catalogue of serial holdings of the various Center Libraries: the SRLS database (hosted by ICRISAT)<sup>4</sup>.
- A common platform to share INMAGIC databases, and the INMAGIC Web Publisher program.
- Joint journal subscriptions.
- Reduction in costs through the joint subscriptions to journals and to CABDirect (Commonwealth Agricultural Bureaux, Inc.)
- Selection of a common journal aggregator for all centers (Swets Information Service), to negotiate subscription deals with publishers.
- Collaboration with FAO in promoting and developing the *Info Finder*<sup>5</sup> and with the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), which gives free access to electronic journals to CG centers and about 1,000 out-posted staff located in targeted countries
- Purchase and upgrade of a document delivery software, Ariel, which hastens electronic document delivery throughout the system and to other organizations
- Stronger representation in the CGIAR ICT-KM Advisory Group Workshop
- Assistance to national agricultural research systems research.

The consortium realized an estimated total cost savings of close to US\$1,130,000 from 2001 up to early 2003 (Alvare, 2003).

## JOINT JOURNAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

Chronic budget shortfall is threatening the CGIAR libraries' mission. This is aggravated by rampant journal price inflation. For agricultural journals, prices increased by 38% for the period 2000-2004 alone (Van Orsdel, 2004). As journal subscriptions form the largest part of the library's operating budget, the CG libraries had to take various measures to temporarily alleviate the problem:

- Suspend book purchases unless the cost is borne by the requestor. However, book funds cannot be used continuously to maintain journal subscription as monographic purchases add equal value to the collection as well.
- Ask individual research projects to absorb renewal costs of journals that are unique to them.
- Suspend all new acquisitions of print and electronic subscriptions unless subscription costs are absorbed by the recommending projects.
- Cancel low priority titles.
- Eliminate duplicate titles in the system.

The evaluation of the feasibility of joint journal subscriptions was one of the priority activities embodied in the strategy formulated during the Global Knowledge Sharing Workshop, participated in by members of the consortium in 2001 (Global, 2001).

The joint journal subscription was implemented in stages, by closing deals with the publishers of the most relevant journals for CGIAR research. The first title under this collaborative agreement was *Science on Line*. Seven centers initially participated in this joint venture in 2002. The reduced cost and the sitewide

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<sup>3</sup>Available at: <http://www-int.cgiar.org/library/cglib.htm>

<sup>4</sup>Available at: <http://www.icrisat.org/text/partnerships/srls/srls.asp>

<sup>5</sup> The *Info Finder* is a free internet resource that provides instant access to full-text digital information available on the web sites of the 16 Future Harvest Centers of the CGIAR and the FAO available at <http://infofinder.cgiar.org/>

plus outreach access earned appreciation from the scientific community of the centers who joined. This resulted in modest savings amounting \$5,859.75 (Ramos, 2002). The initial constraint seen here was that the publisher wanted to issue only one invoice to and to receive payment from only a single entity and not from seven centers. This problem was solved when IRRI volunteered to shoulder all costs and to bill those who opted to join. This was an initial learning experience for the group and now there are nine centers included in the deal.

Recognizing the time and effort required in arranging consortial subscriptions, the members decided to have an aggregator handle all negotiations. Swets Information Service was selected after prolonged discussions among members. This facilitated deals with publishers for more than 1,000 journal subscriptions.

The following year, in 2003, a joint venture for an all-electronic subscription was entered into with four publishers: Cambridge University Press, Marcel Dekker, Oxford University Press, and the National Research Council of Canada. All print subscriptions were dropped as purely online subscription proved to be cheaper. Only 39 titles were paid for, but all members had access to 60 titles. One copy of the print edition of every title is kept in designated centers for archival purposes. Keepers of the print copies are obliged to make the copy available once the need for it arises.

With the IMs taking the initiative and Swets providing expert support, two more publishers were added in 2004: CAB International and Kluwer. Negotiations are ongoing with two other important publishers: Elsevier and Springer. The aim is to achieve improved access to electronic journals across centers, cost effectively with minimal or no duplication of resources.

There was a total of 137 journal titles with 366 paid subscriptions in 2002. Duplication is very evident from these figures. For unique titles, only those centers who paid had access, the rest did not. In 2004, 14 members paid for subscription to 147 electronic journals with system wide accessibility (2,058 access points) (Umbima, 2004). Table 1 shows the price comparison with or without joint subscriptions. The cost per center increased by \$3,000, which is offset by the fact that access increased by 1,692.

Table 1: Consortium Journal Access and Cost Effectiveness (Adopted from Umbima, 2004)

Year	No. of Publishers	No. of centers	No. Subscriptions or access points	Cost – US \$	Average cost per title US \$	Average payment per Center
2003	4	14	366	167,500.00	460	12,000
2004	6	14	2,058	209,321.99	100	15,000
2004	Without the Consortium		2,058	941,844.00		67,275

## SOME MAJOR CONSIDERATIONS IN JOINT JOURNAL SUBSCRIPTIONS

To engage in joint subscriptions is not a simple matter. The following needs to be considered carefully:

- Diverse subject specialization. As an example, many journal titles subscribed by the WorldFish Center library may be of little or no interest to scientists of International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) or the International Potato Center (CIP).
- Geographical location. All staff from main and outreach sites all over the world need to be provided with access. Available IT facilities in these countries need to be considered.
- Ownership versus Access. In the information world, access, as a complement to ownership, is the current predominant practice.
- Online versus print. Slowly, the consortium is moving towards electronic access for journal titles where print can be cancelled. In many cases, print cannot be cancelled without loss of electronic access. The CG libraries need to agree to move from “print plus” to “electronic plus” purchase model whereby all will get electronic cross access to content, with one Center getting

electronic access and print copy for archival purpose. The Center keeping the archival copy will have to provide free document delivery service to other CG centers.

- **Negotiations with Publishers and Selection of Aggregator.** To free IMs from the complex and time-consuming task of dealing with information providers, Swets Information Service was selected to do negotiations on behalf of the CGIARLISC. The ISNAR Librarian, Ms. Monica Allmand, volunteered to act as spokesperson or liaison officer in behalf of all members.

Based on exchange of ideas, several expectations from the aggregator came up:

1. **Flexible economic model.** As many CG libraries have limited new funds to invest in electronic resources, the provider need to offer a reasonable pricing model so that CG libraries can demonstrate to their users that they are delivering more services at the same cost. Libraries need to increase the total number of users of the electronic resources above that of the print version.
  2. **Efficient support services** even after consortial deals are already in place.
  3. **Assistance in the analysis and evaluation of license agreements**, whose conditions vary with each publisher.
  4. **Current awareness and monitoring of the offerings of various publishers** and moving on to those where cost savings is possible.
  5. **Previous service record based on the experience of the different centers**
- **Diversity in license agreements.** No two license agreements would offer the same benefits and conditions so each one need to be studied carefully.
  - **Content Bundling.** Package deals may be attractive but not always beneficial to all. Publishers have these to offer as a way of selling all their products.
  - **Access to Archives.** Normally, publishers offer perpetual access for years with paid subscriptions. However, in this transitory age of mergers and closures, no one can be sure that a URL would be there forever. To address this, the members decided to keep archival print copies of every title in an assigned institution.
  - **Elimination of duplicate titles across centers.** The decision on who to give up what title is a major concern that should be addressed.

## **CONSTRAINTS FACED BY THE CGIAR LISC.**

Some constraints that must be hurdled are (Ramos, 2003):

- ***Geographical Location.*** The centers and their outreach offices are located in various parts of the world. The distance and infrastructure problem is breached by frequent communication via the listserv, telephone, and by occasional meetings.
- ***Diverse mandates of the 16 centers and the CGIAR Secretariat.*** Subject priorities vary per center. For example, selecting journal titles for joint subscription creates a big problem of prioritizing as one title might be useful for one but not for the others. It is a challenge to find win-win arrangements to meet diverse needs. There is a need to focus on common subjects but not to forget core business of other centers such as the WorldFish Center and Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).
- ***Reduced budget.*** Almost all centers are facing a budget decline lately. With so many new titles coming out and the increased costs of electronic resources, providing access would not be possible. Developing project proposals to get financial support from donors in the developing countries is a possible solution.
- ***Human Resources and Capacity Building.*** The number and level of expertise of staff in the various centers vary. Capacity building must be addressed by the consortium, giving priority to those who need them most.
- ***Time.*** Coping with job as well as consortial requirements is a dilemma faced by information providers. IMs, working in a research support unit such as an information service, normally carry heavy workloads due to shortage of staff and the limited budget. Prioritizing activities may be a solution.

- *Language Differences.* Not all members come from English speaking countries and to some extent; a problem in communication and in writing comes up.

### **Conclusion: Plans for the future**

In the future, the consortium could be strengthened by focusing on:

- Creation of a virtual library, one that will serve as a single access point for each center's collections, databases, e-journals, etc.
- Increased and continuing access to e-journals while bargaining for lower costs.
- Active Involvement in the evaluation of tools and resources for knowledge and information management to support the new collaborative research programs of the CGIAR.
- System wide access to better information tools, e.g. Web of Science or the entire Web of Knowledge
- Create wider awareness of the CGIAR Infofinder and continue to add more full text electronic documents to the database (Alvare, 2003).
- Draft standard procedures in sharing resources. For example, policies and guidelines on electronic document delivery or turnaround service standard, cost sharing arrangements, should be defined.
- Appoint a representative of the CG librarians group that will handle all communication and deliberations with the aggregator, publishers and suppliers. It has to be someone who is willing to undertake this task on a voluntary basis.
- Suggest means to improve IT infrastructure for outreach sites for easier access

The members of the CGIARLISC have realized that joining a consortium is not a 50-50 agreement. Some centers act more as givers rather than recipients. Stackpole (1998) gives three critical elements for sustainability: commitment, shared enthusiasm, and flexibility. These must be leveraged by the CGIAR LISC to sustain its existence. Working towards relevance and effectiveness is not a one-sided affair, though. Management, on the other hand, needs to support the consortium through recognition and by allowing members to spend some time to participate. Moreover, it needs to create an environment favorable for the nurturing of the consortium. With strong and sustained management support, the CGIAR LISC has flourished and has set a positive model for others communities in the organization to follow. The momentum of collaboration and savings must be sustained. In spite of numerous constraints, the CGIARLISC has been thriving strongly for more than two years, as problems are confronted head-on as a group.

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