

Sir John Crawford and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)

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Sir John Crawford was the foundation chair of the Board of Trustees of IFPRI from 1975 through to 1981. Tributes paid to Crawford for his foundational role include the following extract from the foreword of a book celebrating IFPRI's 30th anniversary:

IFPRI was fortunate to have as its first board chairman, Sir John Crawford an Australian economist who was a passionate advocate for international agricultural research and an architect of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research. Crawford and the rest of the first Board of Trustees helped to set the Institute on a course that has proven to be fruitful and sustainable...

Crawford used his position as chairman of the Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) to encourage a working relationship with Centre's Week, an annual meeting of Centres within the CGIAR. At a 1976 meeting of the Board he asked the Director 'once a year, to talk to TAC and see what other help they might give you'. TAC, Crawford said, regarded 'this Institute as a necessary part of the total network.' At that stage, IFPRI was listed only as an Associate Centre of the CGIAR but it was clearly Crawford's intention to gain full membership status for the Institute. This was part of a strategy towards the financial stability that such status, at that stage of CGIAR's history, endowed upon its membership. He told the Board that whilst IFPRI was undertaking work for other international agencies such as the World Bank that was parallel to work under way at the Institute it should have the flexibility to accept general support grants which would expand its core budget. Crawford agreed that the Director should have authority to enter into agreements with [non-government] agencies such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Food Council 'to only perform such services as are consistent with its purposes and its priorities of work'.

Crawford's interventions at the 1976 meeting of the Board of IFPRI are instructive: the importance of IFPRI continuing to examine the issues relating to international trade and stocks of food – too little progress was being made on these questions in various international forums; the potential development of large new areas of land or the irrigation of large areas not currently irrigated – he cited as an example the development of the Ganges system (and Borlaug, who was a member of the Board, stressed the potential for expansion in certain areas of Brazil which could only be achieved with certain technological breakthroughs and significant institutional changes.

After what was obviously a long and extended discussion on these and related questions at the 1976 meeting of the Board, Crawford presented his summary. He suggested that: IFPRI should continue to examine certain food policy issues not only in global terms but down to the country level; undertake work involved in trade in food, disaggregated to the country level; and that IFPRI should be concerned with the problematic issue of global resource allocation. He reflected the Board's caution, at that stage, about an extensive program of work in nutrition, and finally restated the major problem of the development of new land and water resources and the overall policy issue regarding the investment necessary to achieve that development.

¹ This blog is based on guidance notes that Dr Blight, who is chief executive of the Crawford Fund, has prepared for a forthcoming biography of Sir John Crawford being prepared under the leadership of Professor Nicholas Brown, chair of the Australian National University's School of History. Blight would welcome comments from participants in the 40th anniversary celebrations that might enrich the guidance notes.

Crawford, at a 1977 meeting of the Board, noted that IFPRI arose from a recommendation of the TAC which felt, however, that as the Institute would be dealing with sensitive issues [of national policy with political implications] it might well be best if its initial support came from non-government sources. TAC was clear that as soon as IFPRI established itself as a reliable, independent research body capable of giving advice without fear or favour, (it had assembled an international Board of Trustees which would not be subject to external control), governments might be less nervous about supporting it. Then the CGIAR might offer full status to IFPRI under which it would be open to member governments to offer financial support.

Crawford used the same non-threatening phrase for the evolution of IFPRI that he had applied at the Australian Asian Universities Cooperation Scheme (of which he was also founding chair) and elsewhere: one of 'slow, steady growth' that could be supported without endangering the stability of the Institute and that in future the question of additional funding could be raised. Crawford also helped to resolve reservations about IFPRI becoming an agent of technical assistance rather than an independent research agency through too close an association with the World Bank or FAO. Rather IFPRI would focus on research which would provide valuable guidelines to government but which would be published independently without restriction.

By February 1978, the Board was struggling with various suggestions to extend IFPRI's scope of work in production illustrating the complexity of its task in determining priorities and the optimum focus of its work. There was also debate on the balance between global work and more specific research work [on a country and issue basis]. Clarification was sought on the distribution program and its integration with other aspects of IFPRI's work. Crawford posed the question as to whether public policy was about distribution of food for work or to provide the work and allow people to buy food.

At the 1979 meeting of the Board of Trustees, Crawford made some remarks which illustrate his association with the FAO. He said:

This was the first occasion on which IFPRI's Board had met outside of Washington. Speaking for the Board and the IFPRI staff he welcomed the opportunity to meet at FAO. He recalled his long history of association with FAO. He was a member of a group which worked to establish the FAO; head of the Australian delegation to the first FAO meeting in Quebec; member of the first Economic Committee of FAO. In addition he had attended many meetings at FAO as Chairman of TAC².

Crawford said that he was 'looking forward to a very active collaboration between IFPRI and FAO.'

Some tensions between IFPRI and FAO were however evident at the meeting in Rome. In particular, according to a member of the Board [Bell], FAO's reliance on official data raised 'additional difficulty in some cases. Official figures may have an aura of "political cooking" about them. There are political consequences of issuing data. Political leaders may wish to alter the impression that figures would give.' Bell supposed that IFPRI as a private organisation not responsible to any government might be in a better position than FAO to make judgements possible.' Basu from the FAO took umbrage at these remarks and said that 'it was not correct that FAO was not engaging in an evaluation process [of official data]. FAO did not just accept figures provided by governments. In cases where FAO had questions about data they would engage in a dialogue with the country in question.'

² Sir John told me once that at a TAC meeting at FAO he was annoyed to discover that TAC's proceedings were being broadcast to the offices of senior staff of FAO and that he had suspended the meeting until such time as the broadcast was stopped.

The minutes from this meeting also provide evidence of what Crawford saw as the importance of research's role in 'drawing attention to policy matters in explainable terms'. Crawford:

Cited the example of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in Australia which he had a role in founding. A key policy had been followed from the beginning that members of the Bureau had to serve the development of policy. They were free to publish papers as learned and as mathematical as they wished in professional journals but if they could not convey the message [from their research] in policy terms to those concerned with policy formulation, then the research was not justified. He felt that IFPRI was in a similar situation.

After a long and complex discussion of IFPRI's proposed program of research - it occupied some ten pages of the record of proceedings of the Board - Crawford summarised the discussion down to seven points:

- A need for a more integrated presentation of the program with a clearer opening section which highlights the relationships [between the components of the program].
- The Board could not compromise on the audience for IFPRI's work. IFPRI is a policy research institute. The Board could not allow IFPRI to lapse into a pure science research organisation.
- The sensitivity of the trade area. The key here, he felt, was to relate trade to questions of food, production and use. IFPRI is a food policy research institute and therefore cannot take on the whole realm of trade theory.
- He noted concerns about inconsistencies in the projects in the Production program and asked the director to watch this area.
- There was a concern about pressures from the CGIAR [to which IFPRI was seeking to gain admission]. He thought that it was understood that IFPRI would have to explain its program and answer questions but that the CGIAR acknowledged the strong responsibility of the Board³ for the program of work of the Centres [within the CGIAR].
- There was concern that the linkages [between competing policy areas] question opened too many doors. It was simply another way of saying that priorities had to be set within the resources available.
- He reminded the Board that one of the useful outcomes of the gap analysis was through grouping of countries. We had at last stopped talking about the world food problem as though it was a homogenous whole. It is not possible to do analyses of all countries, but it is possible to make some sensible statements about groups of countries, he thought. Thanks to the way IFPRI's results have worked out.

His assessment of the discussion was that the Director and the staff and the Program had passed with a pretty strong Alpha on the way the program had emerged. There had been some comments and the one that he thought was most important was that relating to policy statements. He believed that the Board was endorsing the program in substance.

These minutes deserve further examination, preferably by somebody with economic policy expertise. The aim is to show how Crawford was able to capture and summarise the main points of complex discussions.

Examples of the tributes paid to Crawford include the following extract from the foreword of a book celebrating IFPRI's 30th anniversary:

³ Here Crawford is emphasising the independence of the Centres within the CGIAR.

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Of course, a heartfelt thanks goes to Sir John Crawford for the original vision of IFPRI and the tenacity to see it through.

Crawford as chair of the Board was instrumental in the appointment of John Mellor as director of the institute after his detail at the World Food Conference Secretariat for the Ford Foundation.