

Fishing in the Forum: research, development and policy implications for the CPWF

Policy and Practice Panel,
CPWF International Forum on Water and Food
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INTRODUCTION

The First International Forum on Water and Food of the CGIAR Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF) was held in Vientiane, Laos from November 12 to 17, 2006. The Forum had two overarching objectives:

- to link people together to discover what they are doing within the CPWF and in the world of water and food beyond the Program;
- to articulate the links between research, policy and practice.

The Forum was designed to maximize the opportunities for people who usually work far away from one another to come together for a meaningful exchange of ideas, experiences, and techniques for improving water productivity. The core of the Forum's program was made up of 18 (6x3 parallel) working sessions, where short introductions on topics of relevance to the CPWF were followed by structured and facilitated debate. Reports of the workings sessions were afterwards shared and discussed among all participants in 'Open Forum' sessions.

The 'Policy and Practice Panel' (PPP) comprised policy-makers from developing countries, development specialists, members of donor agencies and researchers closely connected to policy. Its key role was to contribute to the discussion, and in particular to draw out the practical consequences of the research being discussed. Panel members attended all parallel sessions. Each evening the members met to discuss and distil key issues raised during the day. The Panel had 10 members.¹

Since for many of the Panel members exposure to the CPWF was limited to the Forum itself, the PPP can only reflect and provide feedback on the CPWF by using the knowledge that was shared with its members during the Forum. It should be noted that the PPP did not attempt to review the CPWF or provide advice based on a thorough examination of all its thematic and basin focal research. Rather it drew lessons and implications from the discussion and knowledge that was shared and gained during the various sessions. These did not provide comprehensive coverage of the CPWF's activities; moreover, they did often address broader themes. The PPP does not aim to provide an inclusive summary of all ideas generated during the Forum regarding Policy, Innovation and Development or Research, but focuses on a number of key issues as they

¹ The Panel comprised Juan Carlos Alluralde, Ramaswamy Iyer, Willem Janssen, Rivka Kfir, Changming Liu, Carlos Loret de Mola, Boagao Moganane, José Lucas Sanchez Mera, David Simon, Khin Ni Ni Thei.

transpired over the days. These key issues are discussed here with the aim to contribute constructively to the track record and achievements of the CPWF and to provide strategic support and guidance to CPWF management and governing bodies in their way forward.

The following main issues will be discussed: the evolving research agenda and research approaches of the CPWF; the opportunities for the CPWF in transnational water management; the need for strong communication, information and knowledge sharing approaches; the importance of capacity building approaches that complement the ongoing research activities; and suggestions for making its research more relevant to policy makers and development agencies. The paper will conclude with an assessment of the evolution of the challenge program as could be gauged from the Forum. The panel hopes that its report further energizes the CPWF community in its many activities.

Research issues

Based on the discussions throughout the Forum, the PPP concluded that certain issues regarding the way research is conducted can be further improved for the sake of effectiveness and synergy. These suggestions address both generic/holistic issues and recommendations for specific future strategic research areas.

Generic/holistic issues: A general observation by the PPP is that many of the sessions were closely linked to each other and that it can be of advantage to the CPWF to build a more coherent research portfolio based on integrating the outcomes of the different sessions. This research portfolio should be realistic and achievable and should strive to improve water and food issues within a framework of integrated resource management. Another general observation is the need to improve the linkages between the outcome of the Comprehensive Assessment and the CPWF research agenda. This was clearly evident in the sessions addressing trade, capacity building and other global factors but could be of value in other areas of research.

Studies reported in the Forum have demonstrated multi-disciplinary research to a varied extent. However, it was agreed that more emphasis should be given in order to accelerate the existing momentum and improve the effectiveness of such integration. The PPP maintains that research on water and food touches many natural and social scientific disciplines. This is especially important where institutional arrangements are of concern. Therefore improved integration will enhance synergy and result in outcomes with more positive impact. This can be achieved through dedicated funding mechanisms that will support such integration as a prerequisite for any research proposal. In addition, certain research areas are core to all CPWF research activities and should also be included as a prerequisite. Examples are gender and cultural issues, inclusion of economics, political ecology and other elements of social sciences. Another related suggestion is that the CPWF should invest in policy research, understanding the formulation of policies and processes related to implementation of policies (see also below).

The PPP strongly support the partnership that the CPWF has built between CGIAR institutions and many national and regional players, including the NARES, ARIs and academic institutions. It is suggested that this could be improved further by better

understanding the role of CGIAR in relation to national and local research institutions when designing the research agenda as well as conducting the actual research and its dissemination. This will allow improvement in the production of both national and international public goods, i.e. knowledge.

Many of the Forum sessions addressed the issue of scale, be it scaling up from local to basin level, or from basin to global level. The PPP recommends that this issue should be researched further. There is a need to better understand the tension between different scales and improved outcomes of both local/downstream and upstream scale studies and their integration. It is suggested that the CPWF should develop generic frameworks for various topics related to water management (utilisation of water in agriculture).

It is suggested that the CPWF should establish a database of best practices and case studies to be used by researchers and for developing an impact framework across the CGIAR.

Special issues: It is suggested that the CPWF should consider the following strategic research areas:

- Clarify the term ‘water poverty’, which is often interpreted differently by various researchers. This may lead to confused information within and across the basins.
- Biofuel production has importance both for water productivity and energy production. It can provide alternatives to fossil fuel and create employment for many in cultivation and processing. At the same time, the cultivation of the raw plant matter for biofuel production requires large amount of water and the production processes result in further water consumption and highly polluted waste-water that may pollute the environment. The links between trade and biofuel production should also be addressed, along with the relationship between trade, water and poverty current and future implications.
- The CPWF is currently addressing livestock production but there is a need to integrate livestock closely with water for crop production
- Research into free trade agreements, investment agreements and local water rights will greatly add value to the CPWF as it will allow other thematic and basin focal projects to be better informed as for the macro environment. Other global issues to be addressed are issues related to climate change, WTO, globalisation and virtual water trade. Trade in virtual water can be also researched in relation to ecosystem resilience and poverty alleviation.
- A key issue raised by the PPP is the need for research to understand “what water means?” Is it an economic good or a human right and how should this issue be resolved?
- It is necessary to address the significance of the CPWF programme in policy terms. Numerous linked issues regarding water and food were discussed in separate sessions. The question arises as to how we can clarify the focal points to be the priorities for the CPWF second phase?
- It is necessary to consider integrating the policy issues for CPWF. It might be necessary to address the following focal aspects: 1) security of drinking water quality

and quantity in rural areas and for animals; 2) food security in terms of water quality and quantity for irrigation, and 3) the environmental flows policies for maintaining ecological functions which provide the goods and service for human being must be stressed as a critical and strategic target.

- For synthesis of policy components, further research is necessary. In order to do this I think that scientifically better understanding of the concept/ terms might need study on lexicon for CPWF.

International Collaboration on Water and Trade

Additional Possible Research Topics on Conflict / Co-operation Over Water Internationally, Intranationally and Between Uses:

Session 13 addressed 'Water as a Source for International Co-operation', but transboundary rivers have more often been a source of conflict. These conflicts are generally resolved through treaties or agreements after prolonged negotiations, sometimes with third-party mediation, and are occasionally the subject of arbitration. Principles are available for dealing with inter-country conflicts over river waters, but these are very general, and what is 'equitable' has to be determined in each case. This necessitates extensive negotiations and mediation. It might be useful if the still-unratified UN Convention Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses were supplemented by a set of principles on water-sharing between upper and lower riparian states. Such a document would not obviate negotiations or arbitration or adjudication, but may at least facilitate those processes and make for quicker resolution of conflicts.

Negotiations over river waters between countries at the governmental level often reach deadlock either because of bureaucratic woodenness and absence of flexibility, or because of other irritants in the relationship between the two countries. Non-official dialogues between NGOs or academic institutions on either side, or at the people-to-people level, can play a significant role in bringing the governments together. Success stories and failures of this kind could be useful subjects of research in order to seek to persuade governments (a) to look beyond boundaries, and (b) to actively enlist the co-operation of NGOs.

Whatever principles or methods are evolved in the context of inter-country disputes will have a degree of applicability even in water-related conflicts between political or administrative units within a country. Case studies of such instances could be valuable.

Inter-use disputes, such as agriculture-industry, rural-urban or irrigation-drinking water, tend to become intractable in the absence of a clear set of priorities and principles. The priorities and principles that could lead to equitable resolutions in such cases might be a valuable subject of study.

It is important to move beyond conflict resolution towards positive bilateral or multilateral co-operation, and a project examining successful and failed case studies would make a valuable contribution.

Very few water researchers and policy makers are aware that water resources and water services may be subjected to the terms of investment and trade agreements, the circumstances and conditions of trade accords change perceptions about national jurisdiction and control of water resources and public utilities in ways that are often not anticipated and can have negative social and economic impacts on water.

Many countries are currently being sued under the terms of investment and trade agreements for conflicts resulting from water utilities and control of water resources. These cases are not heard by national courts but by arbitration tribunals, which apply international investment law and procedure.

There is a connection between local water management, and trade and investment agreements. Trade and investment agreements can seriously affect local water rights and management, unless appropriate caveats are built into agreements and legislation.

Domestic institutional capacities that guarantee the quality of domestic decision making on most countries are not sufficiently well developed. Therefore, there is a need to upgrade national capabilities, this includes monitoring and controlling basic water resources as well as regulating the services associated to water.

The Challenge Program by means of research, capacity building and international lobbying may help countries to establish a better balance to guarantee citizen and national rights, including the duties and obligations of investors vis-à-vis in countries where investments take place.

Communication, information & knowledge management in the CPWF

An important issue that has been observed is the need for satisfying communication needs and for developing information tools related to basin management. The CP's ability to communicate and share accumulated knowledge, including traditional knowledge, is of great importance.

Regarding information sharing with development practitioners and policy makers, the CPWF should consider the development of an online database that shares best practices. Another opportunity for the CPWF is to develop concise formats for sharing the information essential to allow improved user participation and policy dialogue, and matrixes where, for example, mapping of water and water related issues is the entry point to help solve poverty.

The use of proper language among stakeholders is necessary. Policy makers probably have different codes than, lets say, mountain livelihoods. The CP already has accumulated valuable information on themes and regions where language and culture are quite different. In the near future, even more information will be available. So the efforts to communicate effectively and share data with different stakeholders will require a team of communication specialists that can make this information available in the best presentation possible to different audiences.

Capacity building at (sub) basin level

The definition of capacity building may vary, depending on the context. This was demonstrated in **Session 15** where numerous key words were attributed to it. Capacity building is simply the creation of an enabling environment for an individual or institution to deliver the mandate effectively. This can be achieved by training, professional exchange programmes and by providing the necessary infrastructure.

Hydrological basins are ecologically diverse and complex in nature and often cut across national boundaries. Understanding their ecology requires a multi-disciplinary and multi-national research and syntheses. It is therefore, very important that basin countries should share a common vision of sustainable management of basin resources, so that environmental and livelihoods gains may be realised. This can be achieved through the capacity building of principally the resource scientists, researchers and the resource users. Therefore, the Panel recommends:

- developing a Capacity Development Policy or Strategy at national and / or regional level.
- promoting collaboration on capacity development between the North – South and South – South countries and regions.
- integrating capacity development across disciplines and devise complimentary strategies on data generation, integration and application.
- exchanging national scientists across basins.

Research – Policy – Practice Relationships

This section reflects on the relationships between research, policy and practice as aired at the Forum and offers recommendations for enhancing them in line with current *best practice*. These suggestions apply equally well to research under the aegis of the CPWF and independent of it.

Most research reported and discussed at the Forum has been *applied* rather than pure, in that it was designed to influence policy and practice on water and food in pursuit of the relevant Millennium Development Goals. However, undertaking and publishing the results of applied policy-relevant research will not, in itself, get the research into the policy process. There is no guarantee that ideas will be adopted; however, these best practice guidelines will greatly enhance the prospects for having an impact on practice.

Traditionally, the *dissemination and uptake* of research results were often thought to be the separate responsibility of others (communications and media liaison officers, or even the actual or potential users themselves); indeed such views have been heard this week. Nowadays, however, most researchers and research organisations understand that this is inadequate. Researchers themselves must be in direct communication with research users, and not just as an afterthought at the end of a project but *as part of a coherent strategy*. After all, the measure of success of applied research is not the completion of the research as such but its assimilation and application by users.

Very widespread this week has been vague reference to ‘policy’ and/or ‘policy-makers’ as if these are homogeneous and clearly defined concepts. However, research needs to be carefully targeted at influencing particular policies and the specific relevant actors who formulate, modify, apply and enforce those policies.

Identification of the users (or ‘audiences’) of particular research results and what specific problem, policy or legal instrument to target is therefore the starting or *entry point* of what is now often called an *uptake pathway*.

There are many different categories of research users, e.g. particular categories of local actors, community-based organisations, private firms, NGOs (local, national, international), government departments, parastatal organisations, and intergovernmental and international organisations such as the World Bank, IMF, UN agencies, regional development banks, World Trade Organisation and International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives. They are diverse – both within and between categories and spatial scales of operation – and hence are often referred to collectively as *community/-ies of practice* rather than ‘users’. Ultimately, any person or organisation affected by, or with an interest in, the research and its results is a *stakeholder*; users are important stakeholders and the suggestions here are a key form of *stakeholder engagement*.

Users/practitioners have different information requirements, while the most appropriate ways to engage them also vary. These need to be ascertained early on – ideally before the start of a project and certainly long before its completion. This requires reconnaissance to liaise and understand the *priorities, needs, institutional or corporate processes (including decision-making, policy development, legislative and/or budgetary cycles) of the respective research users*. Such needs include the *appropriate form (including the degree of technical detail, layperson’s language and style)* in which results are presented. In a nutshell, researchers must understand and fit in with these requirements.

Sometimes it is possible – even appropriate – to address research users at the end of a project or even afterwards, provided that this is done effectively and meets a particular need. This then becomes an *effective entry point*. Good examples of this are *crises* (e.g. flood, drought, hurricane, conflict, pollution accident) when a user is required to respond quickly but lacks the information, tools and/or policy advice to do so. Such users will then be particularly receptive and this could be the start of a more enduring relationship.

Generally, however, applied research is most effective when the users are engaged and involved from inception. This is as true of a local community group as an official body or company. The most appropriate form of engagement will vary according to specific circumstances but as a rule, *the greater the consultation, collaboration, participation and other forms of active engagement, the greater will be the ‘buy-in’ or sense of ‘ownership’ by the users and hence the greater the likelihood of results being in appropriate forms, fed in at appropriate times and to the right people in the institution, and hence being understood, assimilated and acted upon.*

Large organisations may not wish to be directly involved in the actual research but representatives may readily agree to serve on a *reference or review group*, or to hold periodic briefing meetings.

In other circumstances, where active engagement is desirable and desired, *action research* may be an effective form of engagement. This is where an intervention or innovation (e.g., a well or borehole, sanitation improvement, new farming technique, new crop or livestock variety, introduction of aquaculture, or a new institutional policy) is introduced as part of the research project and its impacts are then studied collaboratively with the beneficiaries.

It is always helpful, even essential, to identify particular '*champions*' in the user group or institution and to embed them firmly in the research process. This is particularly so with local community groups which may have very different identities and social / economic / political positions from the outside researchers. Such champions greatly increase the prospects for project success during its lifetime but also its longer term **sustainability**, once funding and support end. Even after the end of a project, follow-up and monitoring should continue, in order to maintain relationships and keep the doors open.

There is now a growing literature on these issues, while organisations like the Stockholm Environmental Institute (SEI) and the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change (IHDP) have considerable relevant experience. The current issue of IHDP Update (3/4.2006) is devoted specifically to this subject (downloadable from www.ihdp.org).

Assessing the evolution of the CPWF through the Forum

The Forum proved to be an excellent venue to generate ideas and to encourage creativity. In this respect it is very important that the session convenors digest the many ideas that were brought up towards a synthesis that may be shared with their colleagues and with CPWF management. The Forum was less effective for sharing progress within the CP. The format did not allow the detailed presentations that this requires. It could not do justice to the many activities of the CPWF community.

At present, harvesting ideas and generating a sense of belonging may be more important than assessing results, but one would expect that over time this will change. The Panel would recommend that in future the creativity-focused approaches be combined with approaches for taking stock of the progress that the CPWF has achieved.

Fuzziness: In many sessions, the Panel came away with the impression that there was considerable fuzziness in the underlying concepts. The session on 'water poverty' was on the link between water management, availability and productivity on the one hand and poverty on the other; while the concept of landscapes was not clearly defined. The content of several sessions was hard to guess from their titles.

The conceptual fuzziness then combined with loose ends, making it difficult to conclude sessions and draw up clear implications for future actions. At this stage the fuzziness may

be effective (e.g., the “water poverty” session was delightful) to generate further ideas, and to think outside the box. For future communication and knowledge exchange purposes, it is, however, important that the guiding concepts of the CPWF be gradually approximated towards clearly defined terms. This is all the more important to avoid miscommunication among the many nationalities, disciplines and approaches participating in the CPWF.

The CPWF as a learning organism: The Panel was delighted to find several sessions where the main intention was to learn and to think about ways for increasing future effectiveness. The session on Political Ecology, for example, was included in order to address a perceived weakness (the difficulty to engage with policy makers), and to develop ideas on how to overcome those. As we all know, one is never too old to start learning. However, for such sessions to be effective, the presentational and organisational issues mentioned above must be addressed.

The Panel was also pleased with the focus in several of the sessions on ‘factors for success- obstacles – strategies’. Science for development needs to take social, economic, political and any other type of constraint into consideration from the start and cannot start thinking about strategies for impact once the research is concluded.

Relationships on a basis of equality: The CPWF is built on a partnership of NARES, CGIAR centres, Advanced Research Institutes and other institutions. When the Challenge Programs were conceived, one of the considerations of this design was that it would be better able to take advantage of the capacities that nowadays exist in many developing countries. In the Forum the collaboration between the different partners is taken forward to a very equal level, where NARES fully participate in the development of the priorities, the management and the governance of the main activities, and the intellectual leadership of the program. The Panel recommends that the leadership of national partners be further consolidated and reflected in future events. One concrete suggestion is to explore the possibility of exchanging scientists, between countries in basins, or between basins, in order to take advantage of specific expertise.

Millennium Development Goals: The CPWF was launched with a clear focus to contribute to the Millennium Development Goals. However, in the Forum programme, attention to the Millennium Goals was more implicit than explicit. The Panel suggest that the CPWF maintains a clear focus in all of its activities on how they will contribute to the MDGs. As one participant in the Open Forum observed, relating to policy makers requires that we speak their language, of which the MDGs are an important part.

Nurture the blossom, let the fruit set: A final impression of the Panel is that the CPWF is starting to blossom, with many interesting activities taking place and much enthusiasm being generated. However, in most cases the fruit is only just starting to be formed. A key challenge for the Program management is to now ensure that the fruit grows and matures. While the Panel has not assessed the design of the CPWF in great details, its impression is that the design, if not somewhat scientific (e.g., little explicit attention to knowledge management), is sound. The Panel encourages the CPWF to pursue the direction that is

has taken, before considering any major re-orientation in subsequent phases. Meanwhile, certain activities may be modified for managerial or operational reasons, and some activities may be added to take account of new perspectives, but the principal design should remain as it is.

The way forward for the CPWF will occasionally be bumpy, as it apparently has been over recent months. That is only to be expected for a programme with such novel design, focus and management principles. The Panel therefore wishes the CPWF, its participating organizations and all the individual members of its community good luck.