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*ISPC Commentary on the extension proposal
for CRP No. 6 Forests, Trees, and Agroforestry
(FTA) for 2015-2016.*

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Independent Science and
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ISPC Commentary on the extension proposal for CRP No. 6 Forests, Trees, and Agroforestry (FTA) for 2015-2016.

Summary: CRP6 is complex organizationally and thematically, and represents an ambitious range of research and communication activities related to forests, agroforestry and tree resources across the landscape (from forests to farms to plantations) organized into 5 Flagships (FPs). The research-for-development (R4D) challenge, as explained in the CRP6 extension proposal Figure 1, is to address the potential tradeoffs and seek appropriate balance between SLOs 1, 2, 3 versus 4 in forest-, agroforest-, and tree-based systems and associated landscapes. CRP6 aims to make a critical contribution to SLO4, and add a sustainability dimension to the other three SLOs through six intermediate development outcomes (IDOs). ISPC notes that the development of capacity to attain a balance of development with sustainability objectives as illustrated in FTA can have valuable strategic and operational lessons for the CGIAR more generally.

The 2013 Annual Report 2013 presents many examples of achievements and progress. Examples of progress towards outputs include: genetic characterization and propagation methods for indigenous trees in Africa; a major synthesis of the role of trees in resilient livelihoods in dryland Africa; and a database of 230+ adaptation and mitigation projects worldwide for analyzing the potential for synergies between adaptation and mitigation and to assess how gender is considered in these projects. Examples of progress towards achievement of outcomes and IDOs include: successfully influencing the Peruvian government and helping them draft new rules on forest use and planning policies and projects; in Cote d'Ivoire, engagement with the private sector and government within the Mars-supported Vision for Change project leading to the development of a cocoa agroforestry research strategy for sustainable production. The stepwise approach to national emissions reference level reporting spearheaded by FTA has been taken up as a UNFCCC decision in 2012.

An external IEA review of CRP6 in 2014 (this ISPC review is based on a draft version of their report) found FTA's overall objectives to be highly relevant from the global public goods perspective. It confirmed that the same holds for objectives of program components and of several cross-cutting activities such as Sentinel Landscapes and Gender (pg. 10).

Overall CRP6 has made good progress in the past two years. ISPC recognizes the difficulties of crafting a coherent research proposal from the diverse legacy activities that provided its foundations but commends FTA on the progress made in this direction.

The ISPC has, however, identified the following 6 areas where improvements should be made:

1. The number and diversity of discrete research activities and the apparent intention to address everything that is important in relation to trees and forests remains a concern: clarity on priority setting mechanisms and information on what is excluded (and why) would be welcome. In 2011, the ISPC was concerned about the lack of a coherent and innovative overall strategy – that CRP6 should be more than just a framework to contain (compelling but) independent projects. While ISPC notes that the FPs appear more integrated than before, we are still concerned that there is a lack of an explicit priority-setting process. At this stage, it should be obvious which FPs and which activities within FPs have or are likely to have the greatest potential for impact, and these should be prioritized/strengthened, it is hard to ascertain how the >120 research grants will contribute to transformative change and address “Grand Challenges”. The whole is still not greater than the sum of the parts.
2. ISPC recognizes the (implicit) significant potential of Sentinel Landscapes in R4D and the opportunity these sites present to link to *ex ante* and *ex post* assessments as well as providing R4D platforms for other CRPs. Looking forward, this aspect of FP3 could also provide an organizing framework as it takes a landscape approach. CRP6 misses an opportunity to explain how FPs and sentinel sites have evolved and are connected, and fails to present clear explicit rationale for the role of sentinel sites in enhancing the outcomes and impact of the full range of FPs.
3. ISPC recognizes the high transaction costs of the very large numbers of partners and would encourage greater attention to the precise functions and value added of specific partnerships.
4. ISPC recommended in 2011 that CRP6 link to other CRPs (beyond CRP7) so that potential positive interactions and synergies are exploited. Again, ISPC recognizes the transactions costs incurred by complex partnership arrangements, but still considers that CRP6 could do more to develop linkages with other CRPs.
5. ISPC recognizes that CGIAR has a comparative advantage in the R4D challenge addressed by CRP6. But the current portfolio of projects apparently contains activities that others already are doing. CRP6 risks moving too far into an advocacy space already occupied by existing global players (WWF, IUCN, IIED, even FAO). CRP6 needs to articulate its role vis-a-vis these other actors explicitly within its theories of change and design its activities and partnership strategies in line with overall collaborative advantage.
6. Additionally, since policy influence is a main route to impact, further attention might be given to the political economy of the policy process as it relates to trees and forests.

1. Intermediate development outcomes (IDOs), Theories of Change (ToCs) and Impact Pathways (IPs)

1.1 Plausibility of ToC: CRP6’s theory of change (ToC) is based on (a) generating good science to (b) inform and facilitate four interconnected research-to-action uptake streams (policy influence, market development, technology advances, institutional innovations), (c) underpinned by agenda setting, embedding research in uptake streams, priority capacity development and strategic communications, contributing to (d) progress towards FTA IDOs and to (e) the four SLOs.

In addition to the extension proposal, this review draws upon the additional supplementary online material (particularly the FTA 10-pager of 30 Sep 2013 and

Outcomes DoView). These documents and the extension proposal are reasonably successful in conveying a generic theory of change (ToC), and have done very well to align FPs with compelling IDOs, specifying research outputs and thematic outcomes. The associated impact pathways are coherent, even if they are underlain by many assumptions and appear linear.

However, the ToC for the various impact pathways and the CRP overall give only a general discussion of change mechanisms and do not provide much insight on circumstances or context in which specific CRP activities are likely to influence change – it too often takes a “one-size-fits-all” approach in what is a very diverse operational domain. For instance, viewing policies as discrete outputs ready for adoption ignores the messy, iterative processes that are comprised by the term “policymaking”. Hence, while the ToC appears plausible, it is difficult to assess how realistic it is given the multiple, complex levels of interaction amongst a disparate set of stakeholders required to achieve change.

CRP6 ToC could do much more to document evidence in support of the change mechanisms for specific contexts and go further in formulating testable hypotheses regarding those mechanisms (ISPC, December 2012, pg. 7). Expectations regarding ToCs are evolving and only partly formed within the CGIAR, so CRP6 leaders probably deserve some latitude here.

1.2. Contribution to common IDOs and SLOs and linkages to other CRPs: Figure 1 and the "FTA 10 pager" make clear, compelling connections between the broad FTA agenda and CGIAR SLOs. **But the connection between CRP6 IDOs and system-level IDOs is not made explicit in the proposal,** and is limited to a listing of IDOs and SLOs in Outcomes DoView (generic ToC). **Specific to indicators and 10-year targets presented on pg. 4, much more detail is required before these can be evaluated and considered realistic.** Some indicators are quite specific and potentially measurable, and others quite vague – and all of these will pose challenges to address attribution and measurement.

In 2011, ISPC urged FTA to strengthen linkages with other CRPs in addition to CRP7 (recommendation #3). **While FTA is developing a joint initiative with CRPs 7 and 5 in Burkina Faso, and is co-located with CRPs 1.1 (Dryland Systems) and 1.2 (Humid Tropics) in a number of sites, further effort in toward collaboration with other CRPs should be explored.** Linkages do not have to be restricted to joint site initiatives, even as the ISPC remains interested in seeing how CRPs come together at “Sentinel Landscapes”. **Where linkages have been established, FTA needs to describe them through a matrix of activities and impact pathways as other CRPs have done.** FTA should clarify how its work with CRP7 in FP4 has evolved, and how this linkage will work moving forward. Attribution and transparency are critical where different CRPs contribute to different activities on the same theme and/or geographical area.

1.3. Feasibility of Impact Pathways: The discussion of impact pathways in the proposal is generic and limited, and even in Outcome DoView appears linear and involves a large number of possible actions. Hence, even as they appear feasible, it is difficult to assess if they realistically link to specific SLOs and IDOs. Potential barriers to impact pathways have not been clearly identified.

2. Flagship projects - FP

2.1. *Alignment of FPs with the main objective of the CRP:* FTA has 5 Flagship projects that contribute to IDOs 1-6: (1) enhancing the contribution of forests, trees and agroforestry to production and incomes of forest dependent communities and smallholders; (2) managing and conserving forest and tree resources for today's and tomorrow's needs; (3) co-management of forests, agroforestry and trees in multifunctional and dynamic landscapes; (4) climate change adaptation and mitigation; and (5) enhancing the contribution and reducing the negative impacts of globalized trade and investment. These Flagships are complemented and supported by crosscutting themes (gender, capacity building, tenure and access rights), integration platforms (Sentinel Landscapes) and supporting functions (M&E, impact assessment & management). **The main objective of FTA is to conduct research that will enable continued improvement and better integration of agricultural and forest production while protecting and enhancing the resource base, and FPs appear to be aligned with this overarching objective.**

The ISPC notes that the FPs were originally mapped onto existing activities of the main contributing Centers. **It appears that progress has been made in moving towards an integrated set of research activities, but this is difficult for ISPC to assess.** However, even as there is some evidence that FTA has tried to enhance the depth of FPs by focusing on Sentinel Landscapes in FP3 and governance issues in FPs 3,4 and 5 (recommendation #1, ISPC 2011), it remains difficult to judge if these are the optimal set of FPs.

To this end, it would have been helpful to have a systematic presentation of the overarching research hypotheses and questions for each of these “Flagships”. How do the FPs fit together and form a coherent research strategy? What are the criteria (other than institutional responsibility) for this set of FPs rather than any other set? In line with broader efforts at CGIAR activity mapping, FPs sites/country lists could be organized by broad ecological zones (e.g. biomes) as a basis for defining scope, coverage and domains. More importantly, these would be linked to *ex ante* assessments of potential impact (and later of course *ex post* impact assessments).

Flagship 3 offers good potential as a strategic framework for CRP6 as a whole along with Sentinel Landscapes, but it is not entirely clear how (or even whether) these connections across CRP6 FPs are viewed. The lack of clarity extends to Sentinel Landscapes: how are they chosen and are they the places where the Flagships come together? Sentinel landscapes should presumably provide the organizing framework for the flagships – the geographic spaces where impacts emerge and are assessed at a landscape scale – this appears to be the underlying intent but it is not explicit in the proposal¹.

There are a number of questions on the existing FPs both individually and jointly. It is encouraging to read that FP1 (Smallholder systems, including work with germplasm, resource management, extension, product markets, and policy) was developed in collaboration with CRPs 1.1 and 1.2. But what fundamentally distinguishes FP1 from FP2 (Forest and Tree Resources which also works with genetic resources, conservation and management, including restoration of “degraded” lands as well as

product markets), and how was FP2 articulated with CRPs 1.1 and 1.2? A similar concern was raised in the May 2014 review (6-month extension): what are the advantages of treating these FTA resource management agendas (FPs 1 and 2) separately? Do these really reflect substantive differences in scientific questions or different ecological foci? The ISPC recognizes that the boundaries of FPs 3 (Co-management in multifunctional and dynamic landscapes), 4 (Climate change), and 5 (Trade and investment), and complementarities across them and with CRP7 and other CRPs seem clearer (refer 2.2 for related comments). The extension proposal mentions tenure and access rights as a new “crosscutting” theme – this was the recommendation of the external review and may be appropriate, but it is not clear how this theme will be integrated with existing FPs. For instance, both FP1 and FP2 intend to identify and develop new approaches to recognizing rights, and resolving conflicts over distribution of benefits and resource rights. How will this new crosscutting theme affect design and prioritization of activities within and across the FPs?

2.2 Contribution of FP to the CRP IDOs: FTA could better articulate how key activities in each FP link to the IDOs (over and above the narrative given on how each FP targets IDOs): **it should be obvious by this phase which FPs and which activities within each FP are producing or are most likely to produce significant outcomes and impacts, and should be prioritized and strengthened (recommendation #2, ISPC 2011)**. No CRP can work on every potential output, but it is not clear how CRP 6 will go about making decisions on inter-FP resource allocation (refer 7. Budget) is unclear. Some CRP proposals have provided tables showing clusters of activities in FPs linked to outcomes and IDOs; it may be useful for CRP6 to do the same.

3. Gender

Gender is integrated into FTA strategy and the work program, and appears at the SLO/impact level (“gender taken into account”) in the Outcome DoView. FTA has identified a number of gender-related questions within each Flagship besides enhancing, through the Gender Integration Team, the capacity of scientists and partners to incorporate gender in their work, and complement this work using the Gender Relevance Assessment Tool in all projects. 20% of funding during the extension phase is allocated to gender as a crosscutting theme –up from 1.6% of the overall budget in 2011-2013. **While this may represent significant progress in research and resource allocation, and the defined outcome (“gender taken into account”) may be appropriate for this activity, it is not clear how this translates into a reframing of priorities and activities of the CRP6 FPs.**

Additionally, the empirical basis for the “tentative targets after 10 years” tabulated for gender (and other IDOs) in the extension proposal is vague on details (measurement and attribution issues aside). It would seem both more helpful and more appropriate to link the various elements of this large number of activities more closely to one or more ToCs both as a means to communicate the strategic relevance of these efforts and also to clarify priorities in light of prospects for impact by CGIAR and partners.

4. Partnerships

4.1. Relevance and quality of partnerships, and regional collaborations: FTA lead institutions bring together a wide range of international, regional level and country or site level partners including multiple local stakeholders, national governments, NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs), development banks, private sector companies, international conservation and development agencies. These partnerships have a research, knowledge-sharing, or policy and practice orientation. At the regional level, FTA has strong linkages to many regional bodies and initiatives. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), it is leading the “research” strategic axis of the ECOWAS and COMIFAC convergence plans and is closely involved in CAADP.

FTA states that its strategic comparative advantage is a dense network of decentralized offices that work closely with partners on the ground. **However, there is a lack of specificity on the roles and value-add by partners, and hence these partnerships appear ad hoc** – perhaps a legacy of existing relationships of the lead institutions or developed discretely through the >120 research projects rather than a function of their relevance to the ToC. Leveraging existing partnerships or (in the initial phase) developing them through individual projects is not discouraged per se but this harks back to the question of prioritization and strategy: **at this point FTA should start to have a better sense of which of these partnerships are critical and need development (or strengthening) to achieve impact.** 25% of FTA budget is allocated to partners but the details of what this goes towards: research, capacity building, project implementation etc. is unclear.

Additionally, while the term “co-production” and allied concepts appear frequently in CRP6 documents, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which priorities, plans, and outputs are co-generated with specific boundary partners. In part, this may result from difficulty in reporting on the particulars of a very large number of projects; it also may be an artifact of the linear format of the impact pathways. Hence, even as FTA states that its partnership and engagement strategy is built entirely on the ToC and a clear involvement of boundary partners, **more clarity is needed on (1) the operational meaning of the term ‘boundary partner’ and their specific roles; (2) what ‘engagement strategies’ comprise, including how strategies are co-developed and priorities, plans and outputs are co-created with specific boundary partners; and relatedly, (3) what will be done to sustain these partnerships and leverage them effectively along the impact pathway.**

ISPC recognizes that the CGIAR may well have comparative advantage in FTA topics derived from a history of contributions through the activities of Centers. **But a weakness of CRP6 (going back to the original proposal) is a lack of systematic consideration of its “niche” relative to other major actors (IUCN, IIED, WWF, ForestTrends etc.) and whether these or others should be engaged more actively as delivery partners².** Clarity on partnerships would also help to illustrate FTA’s comparative advantage vis-à-vis other global, regional and national/sub-national players.

4.2. Relevance of main changes in CRP governance, structure, partnerships that will be implemented between 2015 and 2016: ISPC notes that FTA has attempted to expand its reach and potential for impact through formalizing partnerships with

CATIE and CIRAD in 2013 i.e. by bringing them into the Steering Committee. FTA intends to include more member partners into the Committee who would qualify as independent. This directly addresses the ISPC recommendation (#4) in 2011 to improve the independent decision-making and oversight function that the Steering Committee is supposed to perform. However, as stated before, the criteria for partnerships, and strategy for additional roles in governance have not been described.

Overall, the notion of spanning boundaries requires a purposeful approach to partnerships, collaboration, and governance and FTA could do better at clarifying this.

6. Phased workplan covering the 2 year extension period until 2016

6.1. Evolution of the 2 year extended workplan from the original CRP proposal: The proposal provides an overview of the major activities carried out during 2011-2014 (development phase) and how they link to planned work in 2015-2016 (extension and refresh phase). There is a lack of detail on how these activities link to FPs and IDOs (CRP-level or common), preventing meaningful assessment of alignment and evolution of the CRP. As stated elsewhere, ISPC feels that by now it should be apparent which FPs and activities are yielding the greatest progress and should be expanded, and which ones might be reduced or divested. **In this same vein, it would have been helpful to know which “legacy” projects/activities are ongoing/new and the reasons for continuing, adding, or dropping activities, projects or sites** (even as we recognize that the proposal format may have constrained such explanations).

6.2. Relevance of the new components to the improvement of the CRP overall expected outcomes and the changed context? FTA states its intention to draw upon the CRP governance review, IEA external evaluation, and CGIAR system review during 2015-2016 to “design a better FTA”. This signals a commitment to adaptive management and is welcome, **but this proposal and the Annual Reports are short on detail and do not explicitly address lessons learned.**

The ISPC notes that the creation of a “pseudo-flagship 6” mentioned in the 6-month extension proposal and addition of “tenure and access rights” (and collaboration with CRP2: PIM) as a crosscutting theme are appropriate and important initiatives. **Again, we are particularly interested in understanding how Sentinel Landscapes and any other FP sites will be used to address strategic research questions and advance the CRP’s contribution to IDOs and SLOs.** Because so much of what FTA does must be viewed within context to be meaningful, the need for an overarching strategic approach to site selection is clear. Thus, it is critical that sites are selected purposefully, using clear criteria derived from the overall CRP strategy, and that these sites and their rationale are identified and justified in the narrative.

7. Budget 2015-2016

7.1 Coherence of the year 2 extended period budget with the one originally proposed by the CRP: The requested budget for 2015 and 2016 represent an overall growth rate of about 9% over the 2014 budget (year-on-year growth rate of ~13% between 2011 and 2013). There is a funding gap of 29% (decrease from 32% of the 2011-2013

budget) for 2015-2016 to be raised through proposals. 25% of the overall budget will be allocated to partnerships, 10% for capacity building, and 20% for gender research. FTA, in 2011, stated that non-CGIAR partners are not likely to be allocated funding (W1&2) if it jeopardizes the viability of participating Centers. And in 2011, the ISPC was not convinced by the CRP6 narrative on the interrelationships between the five components, and that any reduction in funds would result in reductions in *all* five components. It is not clear how budgetary cuts (if any) in this round will affect the allocations, including to FPs, gender research and partners.

7.2 Distribution of the 2 year budget among the CRP FPs: FP1 and FP4 involve considerable research in a larger number of sites, and hence get a higher allocation of FTA budget: about 60% of overall budget compared to 31% for FPs 2, 3 and 5. The overall distribution of resources to Flagships (corresponding to Components 1 through 5 in 2011) has changed between 2011-2013 and 2014-2016: FP1 allocation has increased from 20% to ~33% of overall budget whereas allocation to FPs 2 & 3 has decreased (22% to ~13% and 22% to ~16% of the overall budget respectively). As stated in a different section, prioritization between FPs and within activities for a FP is not explicit in the proposal. **Financial resource allocation between FPs has changed and a narrative would have been helpful, particularly if this reflects shifting priorities.**

Integration platforms: In 2011, the budget for Sentinel Landscapes was US\$3.85 million, representing 1.65% of the USD 232.9 mn budget with an alternate proposal for USD 7.3 mn (subject to funding) for a larger number of sites. **CRP6 proposal suggests that it intends to strengthen Sentinel Landscapes (and ISPC has recognized the importance of this component) but it is unclear from this proposal if resource allocation has changed (if necessary) and reflects this increased prioritization.** CRP6 has stated that it will work for possible long-term external funding of this initiative.

¹ This would also allay concerns that these sentinel sites are artifacts of an earlier commitment to collaborating institutions, and really do support the overall strategy.

² For instance, FTA puts a lot of effort into providing analysis for UNFCCC but it is difficult to assess how influential this will be given the political nature of UNFCCC and the number of other heavyweight research entities that work in this space. The 2013 Annual Report states that the emissions factors for peat lands developed by FTA have been used in IPCC Guidelines for Wetlands, and that its stepwise approach to national emissions reference level was taken up as a UNFCCC decision in 2012. But it is not obvious if FTA's comparative advantage in this space for e.g. is the science and discovery aspects. Perhaps the impact assessment of its climate change work will shed more light on this.