



Fund

Fund Council

12th Meeting (FC12)—Brussels, Belgium
November 4-5, 2014

WORKING DOCUMENT

*ISPC Commentary on the extension proposal
for CRP 5 Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE)
for 2015-2016*

*Submitted by:
Independent Science and
Partnership Council*

ISPC Commentary on the extension proposal for CRP 5 Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) for 2015-2016

Summary:

CRP 5 WLE was initiated in early 2012 after it was recommended for approval in October 2011. It is led by IWMI in partnership with 10 CGIAR centres (CIAT, ICARDA, ICRISAT, World Agroforestry, Bioversity, CIP, IFPRI, ILRI, IITA and WorldFish as well as FAO. The May 2011 ISPC commentary on the first version of the CRP proposal was very critical, describing WLE as a risky investment and highlighting a lack of coherence, focus, clarity and plausibility in the range of activities it described. Just a few months later, a revised proposal was submitted for ISPC review. In the October 2011 commentary on the revised proposal, the ISPC recommended approval, subject to a series of revisions being made to the program, including:

1. Focusing on real hypotheses for rigorous, objective testing, rather than statements of pre-assigned beliefs for which information will be sought to provide justification
2. Better integration of an ecosystem services perspective into the specific problem sets
3. Productivity – ecosystem services trade-offs needed better integration into concepts used at the level of specific projects
4. Strengthening the Rainfed Systems work, which was weak in terms of focus, likely impacts and in IPG content, and was poorly integrated. In addition, there were opportunities for links between the work on pastoral systems and relevant work in other CRPs that were not being explored
5. The degree of independence of the steering committee was questioned given that the Lead Center DG is a co-chair

The ISPC believe that many of these issues, particularly 1- 3, remain valid concerns.

The lack of information in the extension phase Workplan as currently presented makes it difficult to judge the relation of the budget requested to the one originally proposed. In particular, there is no relationship between the proposed “IDO achievements” (pp12,13) and the new flagship project structure. The additional use of the large amount of bilateral funding – more than double what was expected for 2012 – 2016 in the original CRP proposal – will require authorization (as the workplan makes clear) but there is no attempt to show what those funds are for or how they will be allocated in this extension proposal.

The most specific and central concern for the ISPC is the need for **WLE to reconsider the balance between aspirations for high-level policy impacts and more plausible national / regional level innovations**. The ISPC believes that the writers of the proposal have exaggerated the potential for high level policy impact and under-stated the real potential for impact through their on-the-ground presence and “action research” interventions. The pendulum has swung too far away from the core competence of the CPWF at these meso-scales.

Thus the ISPC recommends that for funding to be provided for the extension phase, WLE should undertake to a) provide an update on its complete workplan and budget for 2015-2016 to the Consortium Board advising whether the extensive bilateral funding is to be aligned with CRP activities or otherwise, b) develop much more comprehensive descriptions of its Flagship projects, their intended activities and outcomes and comprehensive budgets for each, for consideration by the ISPC, and c) consider that within and across the WLE FPs an appropriate balance should be struck between research at sentinel sites/given locations geared to developing best practice and concrete outcomes (for water, land and other ecosystem services) against CRP involvement with higher level international policy processes.

1. CRP evolution

CRP WLE articulates the “challenge” as a paradigm shift from goals of productivity enhancement to goals of sustainable agriculture intensification. In this, the “challenge” is similar to that for the Humidtropics System and the Drylands System (i.e. sustainable intensification). The niche for WLE is stated as strategic research to improve resilience and ecosystem services and to clearly define and manage trade-offs at all levels of the water - land-use - ecosystem service nexus. However, the CRP is highly ambitious and it is going to be very important that its efforts are focused on the areas where the CGIAR has a comparative advantage and where impacts will be achievable and measurable. At present the level of ambition may be excessive and the role of WLE in relation to other providers of research and technical / institutional advice is not made clear.

WLE emerged from the Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF) which the ISPC felt was too focused on meso-scale technical interventions which did not necessarily contribute to solving the problems of the mega-watersheds in which they were located. **The pendulum now seems to have swung too far the other way and the focus is very heavily on very large scale policy interventions.** Little is said in the proposal about the technical innovations at smaller spatial scales on which the high level changes will depend. The current capacity of IWMI and its partners is more at this latter technical level, and ISPC is concerned that the links and balance between technical innovations and high level policy change may not yet be right.

The proposal gives a credible articulation of current thinking on integrative approaches to large scale water problems but it is heavy with terms such as “complex adaptive systems” and “interdisciplinary problem solving” which may be appropriate in the abstract but the ISPC have questions about the application of some of these theoretical concepts in places like South Sudan and the Mekong. A political science skill set is likely to be central to operating effectively in such environments, rather than assuming that there is a central planner’s problem to be solved. Overall the ISPC would like to see a higher level of pragmatism / realism.

WLE deserve credit for seeking out opportunities such as the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania (SAGCOT) where there may already be rapid change taking place. Unfortunately, there is no succinct, compelling statement on the vision to address the “grand challenge” for this CRP. There is no real analysis or evidence presented to show that the contents of the CRP represent the

best way for the CGIAR to contribute to a goal of sustainable intensification – indeed an argument could easily be made that investments in MAIZE or GRiSP are better bets for meeting this challenge.

There are major difficulties of attribution of impact and it is very hard to know what the innovations and research questions are. Although WLE is using an “ecosystem service-based approach” and ecosystem services are mentioned numerous times throughout the extension proposal and the Annual Report 2013, **there is no description of which ecosystem services are being targeted by this CRP**. There is one reference to ecosystem services including water (especially quality), land and energy but in other parts of the documentation, water, land and energy are listed in addition to ecosystem services. There appears to be confusion as to what is meant by an “ecosystem service-based approach” and there is little clarity about the outputs of this CRP, which would appear to be centred around “advice” to policy processes. WLE needs to show why its “ecosystem service-based approach” is novel in comparison to what other CRPs are doing. There is little in the way of analysis of ecosystem services and of trade-offs between productivity and ecosystem services – indeed the “sustainable intensification” challenge would seem to suggest that there aren’t trade-offs, and therefore conflicting policy objectives, to be negotiated. For example, the diagram used in Appendix 1a of the September 2011 CRP proposal was presented to help explain the “science behind ecosystem services and resilience”. It shows hypothetical data for a multifunctional landscape in which provisioning services do not trade off with regulatory, cultural or supporting services – crop production is as high as for intensive cropland, so multifunctional agriculture “Pareto dominates” any other possible configuration. If there is no clarity on these fundamental issues, it will compromise WLE’s ability to measure any outputs, outcomes and impacts from following this approach and in enhancing such services. Unfortunately, this makes any analysis of theory of change and contribution to IDOs and SLOs at this stage somewhat superficial.

2. Feasibility of the Impact Pathway and Theory of change

WLE’s theory of change is founded on the growing demand for effective, scalable and sustainable approaches to agricultural land and water management, and revitalization of irrigation systems from the flagship’s development partners. It is not elaborated further but is integrated with its discussion of impact pathways which are yet to be defined (end of 2014). **The extension proposal provides a generic impact pathway that could have been extracted from a general theory of change text and provides no insight whatsoever into how WLE’s theory of change will achieve outputs, contribute to the achievements of outcomes and IDOs and progress towards impact.** No potential barriers to uptake and impact are identified. WLE states that its theory of change recognizes that transforming agricultural investments at scale is complex and dynamic, inherently political, and frequently contentious and that traditional linear research pathways are not effective. Furthermore, WLE’s theory of change framework draws from the theories of complex adaptive systems and innovation systems to emphasize interdisciplinary problem-solving within development processes. If this is the case, why is the generic impact pathway shown in Fig. 2 of the extension proposal linear? On the basis of the information provided in the extension proposal, it is not possible to judge the plausibility of the theory of change. **It is also impossible to judge the feasibility of the impact pathways as they have not yet been developed.**

Impact is expected to come largely through influence on high-level policy processes. Many of these policy processes have a long history and have had variable impact. They are frequently highly political (e.g. the Mekong and Nile Basin commissions). ISPC is not convinced that WLE advice will be translated into impact through these processes. Other vehicles for impact identified are IPBES, SNAP and other similar international academic bodies. The potential for these initiatives to have real impact is still unproven. Although the river basins all cover multiple countries, the likely interventions from WLE will mostly have to be implemented at national or sub-national level. **The ISPC believes that the balance between aspirations for high level policy impacts and more plausible national/regional level innovations needs to be revisited, suspecting that the writers of the proposal have exaggerated the potential for high level policy impact and under-stated the real potential for impact through their on-the-ground presence and “action research” interventions.** As it stands, the major product from the CRP is advice, feeding into high level policy processes in a rather mechanistic way – that the CRP’s expertise is a given and that the policy-makers just need to know what the CRP knows.

The rather high-level and general nature of the IDO indicators will present challenges in terms of measurement and attribution – this might be addressed by including some shorter-term IDOs that are closer to the research process. The program is working to five IDOS: environmental sustainability, income & productivity, gender & equity, risk management. Time-bound (to 2017 and 2025) and quantified indicators have been defined for all of them. Assessing performance will be highly subjective, especially as very few of the indicators include quality statements. Without quality statements, when the research team is under pressure there will be a strong temptation to focus on broad coverage, without checking that the guidelines, tools and policies are being used in a way that is likely to produce SLO impacts. The CRP team is encouraged to add quality statements to at least a selection of their IDO indicators. For example “100 municipalities are implementing RRR programs based on WLE value propositions and models” could be modified to “100 municipalities are implementing RRR programs based on WLE value propositions and models; at least 25 of these have been externally evaluated and found to be effective”.

The establishment of an M&E system has been delayed by the long process of recruiting a coordinator. However, the program has managed to develop a draft strategy and implement some of it. The system will eventually monitor activities and outputs and provide data for evaluations, and is meant to include “opportunities to synthesize lessons learned” although no detail is provided about how this will be done.

3. Flagship projects

There are five thematic flagships and one geographic flagship. Some sort of matrix management will presumably be put in place to integrate the work of the five themes in the four basins. The ISPC will be interested in how this operates, how staff will be deployed geographically and how partners will fit into this complex structure. The flagship structure does appear to be consistent with the intentions behind the flagship concept but as presented there does appear to be potential for duplications and possible redundancy. That said, while very brief and therefore lacking in detail, this is the best written and presented part of this extension proposal.

Sustainable improvements in land and water productivity: ISPC welcomes the framing of this flagship in “action research” but looks forward to seeing greater detail on the scale and nature of the research. We would have imagined that impact from this work would come at the locations of the research and not exclusively through the major financial institutions mentioned in the proposal. If the CRP plans on focusing closely on irrigation in Sub-Saharan Africa, one of the major opportunities for agricultural development impact in the coming decades, the extension proposal does not explain this explicitly nor discuss the possible challenges in facilitating appropriate irrigation management.

Regenerating degraded agricultural systems: Again a laudable flagship but ISPC would like to see more about “proof of concept” and to know exactly how and with whom innovations will be tested. ISPC has less faith in the ability to achieve impact simply through advocacy to inter-governmental processes and international financial institutions and would like to see more emphasis given to demonstrated innovation and uptake. Rigorous evidence on the efficacy of smaller-scale interventions can be a crucial input to advocacy in policy processes, and the CGIAR gets its foot into the door of these policy spaces because of its reputation for being able to span scales from field experiments to policy research. Perhaps the appropriate ambition for WLE would therefore be some carefully targeted meso-scale work where its effectiveness is measurable. Clearly this would be most appropriately pursued through close collaboration in field sites from other CRPs such as Dryland Systems, Forest Trees and Agroforestry or GRiSP, otherwise it is hard to justify.

Recovering and reusing resources in urbanising ecosystems: Again a very important issue and one where the CGIAR should intervene. ISPC recognises the difficulty of providing detail in a short proposal but would nonetheless have liked more precision on where, with whom and how innovations in this areas will be tested.

Managing resource variability and competing uses: The aspiration is good but this flagship as presented here appears rather theoretical. The ISPC will be interested to see where, how and with whom this research will be conducted. Ecosystem valuation has a mixed track record as a source of real influence on decisions – especially in some of the contested water basins where WLE is operating – and is an area where a number of private sector consultancies operate, as well as significant multilateral initiatives such as TEEB.

Strengthening decision analysis and information systems: The ISPC doubts that the provision of better information to decision-makers will in itself lead to impact through the long and complicated impact pathways where WLE is operating. ISPC would like to see more thought given to policy-making processes in this context. The decision analysis work will identify options that are probabilistically superior through *ex-ante* Monte Carlo simulation, and will aim to influence policy-makers through providing them with this information. What is the evidence from past policy influence in this domain? Where has a lack of information about which “decision” is best led to better policies being implemented? These methods are used in business where there is a degree of central control on the part of a CEO. This context is only loosely comparable to a senior policy-maker in a developing country.

Integrating ecosystem solutions into policy and investments: ISPC believes that this flagship is the vehicle for achieving impact from the other flagships. The nature and quality of the processes

that are put in place in each of the basins will determine impact. The overall proposal would have been more credible if greater emphasis had been given to the basin level impact pathways and theories of change. A high degree of political awareness and capacity is required but this is a scarce skill set.

In at least the case of flagship project 1 on intensive, irrigated and river basin systems, the CRP has already demonstrated leadership with tangible results with next users through advocacy, scientific papers around the subject of management of water and agro systems for food security – focusing on the nexus among production, natural resource management and ecosystems services. The issues addressed by the CRP are very high priority, but the CRP still lacks a real focus and there is a need for a robust priority-setting among flagship projects 1, 2 and 3.

4. Gender

In common with other CRPs, this program must be aware of the household and community dynamics that affect their final beneficiaries as well as the dynamics within their relationships with research, value chain, development and enabling partners. Gender is usually a good place to start, because gender specialists are acutely aware of the impact of household and community power dynamics on women and children. The gender strategy has its own theory of change: “Engaging men, and addressing discriminatory norms, behaviours and practices that limit women’s participation, access to and benefits from water, land and ecosystem services, and improved overall stewardship of water, land and ecosystems, are central to ensure change”. It has identified research questions on women’s roles, including their role in decision-making, and the effect of institutions, that will directly address power balances.

Administrative measures to ensure gender issues are addressed and appear sufficient. WLE has a gender coordinator who is a full member of the management team, and has created the gender, poverty and institutions core theme, which is to be commended. The ISPC will be interested in seeing examples of, and evidence for changes in, gender roles as the program evolves. The gender aspirations are sound but the practical measures to achieve gender impacts are not very clear at present. A total allocation of 21% of funding in 2015 and 2016 is allocated for gender-specific research, an unusually high percentage.

5. Partnerships and regional collaboration

This is an important CRP that requires significant involvement from policy-makers of various countries. Since ecosystem services transcend political boundaries, the success of this CRP depends on important choices regarding partners. **WLE appears to have a robust process in place or planned to select their partners as “agents of change” even if this is coming somewhat late in the establishment phase of the CRP. The Innovation Fund will complement that process, and the goals of the Innovation Fund are bold and commendable.** The CRP aims to use 50 % of the Innovation Fund budget to bring in the best partners from outside the CGIAR system. This must strengthen the CRP’s standing among world scientific community and, in turn, also strengthen the

outputs and likely outcomes. Further, a minimum of 30% of its region-based flagship budget goes to external partners.

The ISPC believes that the impact of WLE will require very effective partnership arrangements at the levels of the basins. The problem here is that there have been massive investments over many decades in various sorts of partnership arrangements for all of the target basins, and many of these have failed to live up to the hopes with which they were entrusted. The political nature of these basin processes creates a minefield of complexity and interest groups through which WLE will have to navigate.

WLE aims to have shared impact pathways with other, appropriate CRPs, for example in the Volta / Niger basin. The partnership strategy offers much good advice about identifying partners and promoting learning through partnerships, but could specify more about the principles for partnership and how best to develop high quality relationships within a partnership.

The breadth of organisations listed as partners is impressive and many are relevant and of high quality for the kind of activities implemented in WLE. These partners, such as the Natural Capital Project, ZEF, and the private sector (for example, in the case of the Southern Agricultural Growth Corridor of Tanzania – SAGCOT) either bring unique skills and capacity to the program, or offer greater opportunities for influencing the direction and impact of large investments taking place through public-private partnerships. What is less clear is whether the CRP has forged partnerships that bring complementary skills, particularly in political science, that make up for possible gaps in expertise among the staff of the CGIAR Centers.

6. Phased workplan

The Workplan for 2015-2016 is presented as a table without any narrative support. Its presentation as outputs and outcomes without activities makes it difficult to assess how feasible the achievements are. Without a supporting narrative, it is not possible to judge how elements have been aligned, adapted or ended appropriately, nor is it particularly helpful in assessing the contribution of WLE activities to IDOs and SLOs. In addition, as the outputs and outcomes are not aligned with the flagship projects, the ISPC cannot judge the relevance of the new structure of WLE to the improvement of the CRP's overall expected outcomes and the changed context.

Some changes from the original proposal can be inferred such as:

- A refocus of research from Strategic Research Portfolios to flagship projects. This would appear to strengthen outcome / impact monitoring at a longer timeframe, but the CRP should be careful not to reduce focus on monitoring research quality and outputs.
- The addition of a flagship project for integration of ecosystems into policy and investment, in collaboration with CRP PIM.
- The introduction of the Innovation Fund to strengthen and target agents of change.

These latter two aspects in particular are good developments. The flagship on integrating ecosystems into policy and investment will need to draw strongly on the PIM CRP for support on integrating a political science perspective, and the Innovation Fund is a potentially very useful addition. However, **WLE should publish a much more detailed Workplan for 2015 and 2016. The lack of information in the Workplan makes it difficult to judge the coherence of the budget requested to the one originally proposed.**

It is a notable feature of the information provided on the overall budget for the period 2012-2016 that bilateral and W3 funding is expected to be USD 163 million compared to a budgeted value of USD 80 million. This brings the total budget for the CRP to USD 323 million over the period 2012 to 2016. The CRP will need authorization to increase their bilateral commitments.

There is considerable heterogeneity in size of the six proposed flagship projects. In the proposed 2015 budget, FSP 1 (Sustainably Increasing Land and Water Productivity) receives USD 9.0 million; FSP 2 (Regenerating Degraded Ecosystems) USD 16.5 million; and FSP 3 (Reusing Resources in Urban Systems) USD 4.2million. It is not clear whether this allocation among the flagship projects for diverse systems is determined by the current allocation of funds including W3 / bilateral (representing 59% of total expenditures in 2013), or by a careful analysis of likely benefits, probabilities of success and comparative advantage of the research of the CGIAR system.