

Common Criteria
for
CGIAR Research Proposal (CRP) Design and Assessment

30 August 2010

CGIAR Research Proposals (CRPs) are reviewed at various stages of their development and approval. These assessments are conducted by:

- (1) The Consortium Board at the stage of CRP development and prior to the Consortium Board submitting the proposal to the Fund Council for approval;
- (2) The CGIAR's Independent Science and Partnership Council (ISPC) organizes an independent peer review process as a basis to advise the Fund Council for decision-making about the investment worthiness of the proposal; and
- (3) The Fund Council may wish to further review specific aspects of the proposal before its decision for funding. Subsequently, CRPs are monitored and evaluated for the progress and results.

All these reviews are intended to provide feedback to the Consortium Board and the proponents of the CRP for improving the program.

It is important that those developing CRPs, those reviewing them and those deciding on their funding have the same understanding of what makes an acceptable CRP and that consistent criteria are applied by the reviewers at the various stages of CRP assessment and approval. These criteria are required to support (i) the design of CRPs; (ii) the assessment of their investment worthiness particularly regarding the scientific quality, relevance, partnership arrangements and likely development effectiveness; governance, management and financial soundness; and, (iii) the subsequent monitoring and evaluation of program performance. However, each reviewing body that assesses a CRP proposal may give different weight to different criteria. The Fund Council is the final decision making authority on approval of CRPs.

The main criteria which serve the needs of all parties should be inclusive of the most important characteristics and ambitions of CRPs and sufficiently discriminatory to effectively guide improvement of proposals and approval.

Common Criteria

The common approach to CRP development and assessment across the CGIAR System is based on the following six main criteria:

1. Strategic coherence and clarity of Program objectives
2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact
3. Quality of science
4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management
5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management
6. Clear accountability and financial soundness, and efficiency of governance

The scope of the elements encompassed within those criteria (Annex 1) may be assigned different weightings at the different stages of CRP development and review.

Principles Governing Complementary Reviews during the Design and Approval of CRPs

- i. The new CGIAR places emphasis on the independence of bodies and functions (Consortium, ISPC, the Independent Evaluation Arrangement [IEA] etc) and avoidance of conflict of interest.
- ii. Common criteria apply to the guidelines and Terms of Reference (ToR) that govern the development of CRP proposals and their assessment, and the subsequent external evaluations of approved CRPs in the course of their implementation. However, at different stages of CRP development the reviews serve different purposes and thus the detailed ToRs need to accommodate the specific purpose.
- iii. There will be a sharing of external expert assessments whilst safeguarding the anonymity of reviews. This will allow synergy from the review process and reduce duplication. However, as the external reviews commissioned by the Consortium Board and those commissioned by the ISPC are in sequence and apply to CRP proposals at different stage of development, single reviews are unlikely to satisfy the purpose of the different reviewers. Furthermore, the ISPC's independence in advising the Fund Council needs to be safeguarded.
- iv. It is desirable that the reviews commissioned by the Consortium Board and ISPC for their respective purposes complement each other in improving the program. Similarly, any additional review that the Fund Council may conduct also ought to complement previous assessments.
- v. The oversight role of the Consortium Board requires the Board to ensure the adequacy and compliance of CRPs that it proposes on behalf of the Consortium for funding to the Fund Council. Its review requirements may thus be aimed at the revision and finalisation of adequate proposals. Furthermore, the Consortium Board has the primary responsibility to secure optimal balance in terms of scope and resources within the CRP portfolio, and synergy between CRPs and appropriate boundaries of individual CRPs in the context of addressing the Strategic Results Framework (SRF).
- vi. In as much as all three entities are concerned with the quality and feasibility of the CRPs, the ISPC is particularly charged with assessing scientific quality and relevance and the credibility of the proposal in relation to other potential suppliers of this research. Its advice will be totally independent and will be the basis for investment decisions by the Fund Council. Provided reports of earlier reviews are available, the ISPC may be selective in choosing areas of an overall CRP for review, to complement the earlier information and analysis.
- vii. The Fund Council will use the reviews and advice provided by ISPC. It may, if necessary, take into consideration other criteria as they affect the availability of finances and risks in relation to development.

- viii. The agreed common criteria for CRP design and assessment will be an important consideration for subsequent CRP performance evaluation to be conducted under the aegis of the IEA.
- ix. The common criteria may be adjusted in the future as the System learns from experience with assessing the CRPs.

Application of Common criteria in CRP Development and Reviewing

The common assessment criteria should enter into the Terms of Reference for the different reviews.¹

To augment the criteria of the programmatic and program management elements, it is anticipated that the Fund Council will conduct (through the Fund Office and other mechanism or arrangement that it may use) the assessment of the CRP's financial plans, contractual details, IP regimes and other such areas that require specialised legal and fiduciary expertise. For instance, it is appropriate for the ISPC to consider the credibility and defensibility of financial plans against the research proposed but it is more appropriate for Consortium Board to review, and subsequently monitor and update the Fund Council regarding the financing plans, balance of cost items and the soundness of financial operations and reporting.

The entire set of CRPs will not be developed simultaneously. However, to the extent possible, the review of individual CRPs needs to assess (a) the adequacy of the entire portfolio of CRPs and how it comes together in a balanced way to address the major objectives as described in the SRF; and (b) specific linkages across the CRPs and synergies between them and the relative merits and boundaries of individual CRPs. In the first instance this is the responsibility of the Consortium Board which is also leading the finalization of the SRF. These issues also need to be revisited and monitored when the SRF has been completed and the entire CRP portfolio and the cross-cutting platforms have been designed.

With clear and agreed upon descriptions of the criteria above for how they are used in the development of CRPs and their assessment in the different stages, these criteria can fulfil the objectives of the different parties and the CGIAR System. For monitoring and evaluation of programs during implementation, the CRP proposals need to present a sufficient strategy and the indicators for each of the criteria need to be developed in concert with finalization of the SRF. The strategy and indicators need to be fully aligned with the requirements of the System's future M&E processes.

¹ Annex 1 provides the ISPC's guidelines for its CRP proposal review, derived from consultation at a planning workshop 4-5 June, 2010. The six main criteria are accompanied by elaboration of each criterion with clarification and indicators to be included. Annex 2 contains a checklist that guides the development of CRPs.

CRITERIA FOR the ISPC's ASSESSMENT OF CRPs

(updated 17 August, 2010)²

The ISPC's assessment is based on the following six main criteria:

1. Strategic coherence and clarity of Program objectives
2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact
3. Quality of science
4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management
5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management
6. Clear accountability and financial soundness, and efficiency of governance

In the following these criteria are elaborated to indicate what the assessment should entail. A set of indicators is provided for each criterion to guide the peers' assessment.

1. Strategic coherence and clarity of Program objectives

The proposal presents a compelling and coherent research plan clearly spelling out the needs and main objectives and the critical linkage to the Strategy and Results Framework. The proposal is strategically coherent regarding the CGIAR's vision, and in the global context of agricultural development and research priorities. The nature and magnitude of the agricultural development needs and the opportunity or constraint being addressed (including target impact domains) are clear and the researchable topics, including research on constraints to uptake, are the most relevant ones. The proposal is supported by a comprehensive analysis of the global research context and the alternative research suppliers in the relevant area. The CRP partnership's comparative advantage is well justified. The proposal demonstrates the added value compared to current Center research and indicates synergies to be gained from inter-linkages with other CRPs.

Indicators:

- Strategic coherence
- Problem identification with link to SRF is explicit
- Researchable topics are logically derived from key target problems and opportunities
- Analysis of global research context is sufficiently comprehensive and includes recognition of main alternative suppliers of research
- The added value of the CRP over Center programs is clear
- IPG nature of research is demonstrated
- Links to regional priorities and/or priority setting processes are indicated

² The updates take into account comments from Members on a 16 July version of *Common criteria for MegaProgram design and assessment*.

2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact

The proposal contains a complete description of the plausible impact pathway or multiple impact pathways (as required by the different themes of a CRP) indicating the intermediate changes (outcomes) towards impacts on food security, poverty reduction and environmental sustainability that the research (outputs) can influence. The estimated benefits are plausible and based on a credible theory of change specific to the field of research. The impact pathway is supported by an appropriate gender analysis (or a plan to conduct such an analyses) and a capacity building plan. The impact pathway also describes what negative impacts may emerge or be associated with other positive results; and identifies the constraining and facilitating factors on which success for outcomes and subsequent impacts may depend.

The deliverable outputs and intended outcomes are spelled out for the near and intermediate term and sufficiently indicated for the longer term. The sequence of research proposed over time is logical and the time frame for delivering outputs is both stringent and feasible particularly in the near term. The timeframes for addressing major specific research problems within the overall CRP agenda are elaborated. A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan for tracking progress and achievement, for adjusting research plans and for fostering learning is indicated.

Indicators:

- Significance of the planned outputs to address the problem identified
- Feasibility of outputs relative to resources and timeframe
- Inclusion, justification and appropriateness of adaptive research
- Quality of impact pathway analysis and description
- Estimated benefits in terms of CGIAR goals as defined in the SRF
- Clear theory of change and credibility of estimated benefits
- Sufficient trade-off analysis of expected positive and potential negative impacts
- Adequacy of gender analysis (or plan)
- Adequacy of activities, such as capacity building and social science research components to enhance relevance and uptake
- Indication of basis for future ex post impact assessment

3. Quality of science

The scientific approach is of high quality irrespective of the orientation of the research whether strategic, applied or more basic research. The proposal sets the proposed research in the context of the overall advancement in the field and research done elsewhere. The proposal presents a clear vision of how research focus is appraised and guarded for efficiency and effectiveness. The research teams and leadership proposed have strong competence and there is critical mass in all areas of research. The analysis of risks inherent in any research is transparent.

Indicators:

- Quality of hypotheses relating to the needs to be addressed
- Appropriateness, feasibility and innovation of research approaches chosen
- Ambition of research
- Quality of research hypotheses that relate to the constraints identified
- Research is based on state-of-the art knowledge in the domain and can lead to filling important knowledge gaps
- Facilities and procedures for conducting research are adequate
- Scientific track record of research teams is evident and the track record of research leadership is demonstrated

4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management

There is strategic justification for inclusion of partners for research complementarity and excellence and for efficiency of generating outcomes. The partnerships can optimally serve the objectives of the CRP. The partners' roles are clearly spelled out and related to the impact pathway. The proposal clearly elaborates its integration with other CRPs, and relationships with other CRPs are also explicit in the clear demarcation in the proposal of the CRPs area of activities. There is evidence of the core partners' commitment to the research agenda proposed and the incentives for engagement of partners are clear. The proposal is transparent regarding allocation of funds to partners and management of financial and in-kind contributions from partners.

Indicators:

- Partner inclusion is clearly justified
- Partners' roles and responsibilities, including in M&E, are elaborated
- Relationships with other CRPs show clear rationale and aim at synergy and effectiveness
- Evidence of core partners engagement in strategic and research planning
- Appropriate balance of types of partners
- Clear partnership development strategy
- Formal agreements with core partners demonstrate commitment

5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management

The proposed management structure is simple and clear. The model chosen promotes program ownership. The management model is efficient and transparent regarding decision making (including quality control, adaptiveness and fund allocation), delivery of results and communications. Appropriate management for research quality should foster recruitment of highly qualified researchers, career development, learning and appropriate capacity building.

The linkages to program host organizations, other core partner organizations, platforms and other System components are clear. The process for fund allocation is transparent, and the planned allocation among program components and core partners is specific.

Considering that the programs may initially be set up by merging management models and cultures of different players, a transition to an optimal management model can be expected.

Indicators

- Clarity of reporting relationships and accountabilities and of research structures
- Management arrangement enables strong program leadership
- The M&E plan is linked to decision making in the program management cycle
- Expenditures as shown in breakdown (by partners, by type of activity) are balanced
- Linkages with other CRPs and other relevant System components is adequately defined
- Supporting arrangements are appropriate:
 - Communication strategy
 - Delivery strategy
 - Capacity building strategy
 - Skills resource strategy
 - Risk management strategy

6. Clear accountability and financial soundness, and efficiency of governance

Here it is assumed that a CRP requires a Program-specific oversight mechanism that facilitates reporting to the Consortium Board. The specific governance arrangement proposed is efficient and tailor-made to the CRP needs. It is light and not onerous. The governance mechanism re-enforces the Consortium Board's role as the body with the overarching oversight responsibility. The proposal demonstrates how duplication of oversight and conflict-of-interest is avoided in the governance proposed.

Indicators

- Governance roles and accountabilities are clear
- Arrangements with partners' governing bodies are transparent
- Role of Consortium Board in overall oversight is elaborated
- Mechanisms for managing conflict of interest are explicit
- Minimum compliance reporting
- Proposed funding is realistic and commensurate with the research plan and the CRP proposal is sound regarding financial planning and reporting

Caveats

There are two caveats to be borne in mind in the assessment of CRPs: First; as different areas of research have different characteristics and research trajectories, which have implications for the development and assessment of programs in those areas, these differences ought to be sufficiently considered in the assessments. Second; initially the Mega Programs may be based on mainly on-going research and the ability to take a clean slate approach to designing the program may have been limited. Similarly the Programs may initially rely on transitional management arrangements. Thus the review needs to include an assessment of a proposed transition for bringing the continuous and new elements to optimal balance.

Check List for the Development of CRPs

The following checklist of points reflects the main criteria and other considerations for guiding the development of CRPs. The inclusive list is necessary for the preparation of any expected CRP.

Any CRP should include:

- Clear objectives; the clarity and relevance of the expected outcomes with regards to the SRF
- A high calibre scientific conceptual framework, given the problem being addressed
- Indication that the approach and methods proposed are sound and whether this approach is likely to lead to greater coherence and coordination among partners and thereby, more robust results and outcomes
- Justification of the program
- Measurable results
- Identification of the Centres involved and their inputs
- Management arrangements for implementation; whether the proposed management structure is likely to be effective and non bureaucratic. Timeframe (and timelines); whether the proposed timeline is realistic
- Expected outcomes
- Necessary partners at the international, regional and national levels; the division of responsibilities among partners is clear
- Innovation (hypotheses, orientation of research and means of implementation); what are the innovative elements and unique features of the proposal
- An approach to gender research and capacity development that is appropriate and sufficiently well thought through to be effective
- Indication of the integration with other CRPs
- Statement of risks (which may affect the research success and delivery of stated outputs and anticipated outcomes and impacts of the program)
- A quantified impact pathway; whether the impact pathway is coherent and convincing and integrates the most appropriate partners
- A monitoring and evaluation strategy and processes showing the clarity and robustness of the monitoring and evaluation process
- Budget; the budget requested appears credible and defensible, given the problem being addressed and the partnerships involved