

## LEGACY BRIEF 3

# Reflections on a decade of innovative research-for-development

Capturing lessons and insights from the implementation of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) – to help inform the development of future research programs and the transition to One CGIAR.

This synthesis brief captures insights and lessons from the implementation of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) over the past decade. By assessing the program's performance, thematic scope and its management, governance and structure, as well as the ways in which the program has monitored and communicated its research outputs, this brief aims to consolidate WLE's experiences and inform the transition to One CGIAR and the development of future research-for-development initiatives.

Over the course of its 10-year journey WLE developed practical and science-driven innovations that countries and farming communities can adopt to address critical development challenges and transition to more productive, sustainable and resilient food systems. These ranged from, for example, affordable and inclusive insurance for flood-prone farmers to landscape restoration, soil spectroscopy and business models that strengthened pro-poor solar irrigation initiatives. The program's emphasis on the importance of ecosystem health as a foundation of agricultural systems has also contributed to a global paradigm shift in agricultural research-for-development – reflected during discussions at COP26 and the 2021 UN Food Systems Summit.

The content of this brief captures discussions held during two reflection workshops held in November 2021. These workshops provided a space for people intimately involved in WLE – members of the program's Management Committee, Independent Steering Committee, and senior researchers and staff of WLE's Program Management Unit (PMU) – to offer perspectives on what the program achieved, and the processes, systems and structures that enabled the program to navigate the challenges it faced.



Photo: Tadesse Desalegne / IWMI

Reflecting the honest and self-critical nature of the discussions, participants also identified where improvements could have been made. From these observations it was possible to develop a series of actionable recommendations for future research-for-development programs, including the Initiatives to be implemented during the [2030 Research and Innovation Agenda of One CGIAR](#).

The brief is divided into the following sections:

- **Program performance** assesses how effectively the program influenced global discourses and addressed key challenges in the water, land and ecosystems space.
- **Program integration and cross-sectoral collaboration** explores WLE's flagship structure and whether it enabled or constrained integration and cross-sectoral collaboration.
- **Program management and governance** considers how effectively management and governance supported the program to deliver on its mandate.
- **Reporting, monitoring, evaluation and learning** assesses to what extent monitoring and evaluation supported programmatic learning.
- **Communications** considers how effectively and strategically the program's research outputs were communicated to external audiences.

## Program performance

**This section assesses whether the program addressed key challenges in the water, land and ecosystem space, identifies which research areas have advanced through and because of WLE, and considers the program's influence on global discourse. It also looks specifically at the performance of the program's Gender, Youth and Inclusion (GYI) activities and assesses whether WLE's Commission on Sustainable Agriculture Intensification (CoSAI) complemented the program's wider research-for-development agenda.**

### Influencing One CGIAR

The program's focus on integrated approaches to water, land and ecosystem management has contributed to a paradigm shift in agricultural research-for-development – both within CGIAR and beyond. Previously dominated by crop breeders and agronomists with a limited consideration of integrated or 'systems' approaches, the CGIAR responded positively to WLE's research and the research of other 'systems-focused' CGIAR Research Programs (CRPs), subsequently embracing their wider research agenda.

One CGIAR's mission and vision (See box 'One CGIAR's mission and vision') – which focus on food, land and water systems – clearly demonstrate the organization's efforts to more tightly embed systems thinking into its research



Photo: Hamish John Appleby / IWMI

## One CGIAR's mission and vision (2021)

**Mission:** “To deliver science and innovation that advance the transformation of food, land and water systems in a climate crisis.”

**Vision:** “A world with sustainable and resilient food, land and water systems that deliver diverse, healthy, safe, sufficient and affordable diets, and ensure improved livelihoods and greater social equality, within planetary and regional environmental boundaries.”

portfolio. This shift is also illustrated by the [Action Area on Systems Transformation](#); three out of the four units within this Action Area integrate the work of the WLE program and its researchers. Moreover, all One CGIAR initiatives (including the Action Areas ‘Resilient Agri-Food Systems’ and ‘Genetic Innovations’) need to show demonstrable improvements in ecosystem health and biodiversity, and several directly build on the work WLE has implemented over the past decade.

One CGIAR initiatives that most directly reflect WLE's research include:

- [Mitigation and Transformation Initiative for GHG Reductions of Agri-food Systems Related Emissions \(MITIGATE+\)](#)
- [Transformational Agroecology Across Food, Land and Water Systems](#)
- [Nexus Gains: Realizing Multiple Benefits Across Water, Energy, Food and Ecosystems](#)
- [Nature-Positive Solutions: Enhancing Productivity and Resilience, Safeguarding the Environment, and Promoting Inclusive Community Growth](#)

Although these developments demonstrate that One CGIAR is committed to building on the solid foundation that WLE and other cross-cutting programs have developed, additional work will still be needed to shift mindsets and more tightly embed systems research within One CGIAR moving forward.

## Beyond One CGIAR: Influencing a new global paradigm

WLE's emphasis on the importance of ecosystem health as an essential foundation of agricultural systems, and the program's belief that agricultural landscapes can – and should be – productive ecosystems, has also resonated beyond One CGIAR. WLE can be considered a pioneer in this field. The shift to prioritizing ecosystem health is only now coming to the fore – reflected, for instance, during the UN's Food Systems Summit and UN Conferences of the Parties (COP) for climate change, biodiversity and desertification. At COP26 in Glasgow at the end of 2021 discussions adopted a wider systems perspective and moved beyond the energy sector to consider implications for all sectors, including food and agriculture as well as water, land and ecosystems.

There is clear evidence to suggest that WLE has informed – and will continue to inform – the work of donors, farmers, investors, governments and other relevant public and private institutions such as basin organizations and companies. Examples of the program's influences are provided below:

- A major outcome during the program's final year was an [evidence review](#) produced with the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office which suggested how the agricultural sector could move towards more nature-positive production through the delivery of integrated agricultural solutions on climate, biodiversity, nutrition and livelihoods.
- A [2016 paper](#) produced by WLE chartered the way for sustainable agricultural intensification and remains one of the most cited papers on the subject. It helped place sustainable intensification within a broader context of ecosystem-based approaches and influenced FAO's approach to agroecology and ecosystem-based approaches.<sup>1</sup>
- WLE research influenced UN-Water to incorporate environmental flows into the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) water stress indicator (SDG 6.4.2); contributed to UN-Water's water use efficiency efforts through the development of methodologies and SDG target monitoring; and persuaded UN-Water to emphasize the importance of nature in its [World Water Development Report, Nature-Based Solutions for Water](#). The report's definition of nature-based solutions, and the relationship between infrastructure and ecosystems services, was informed by WLE research.

<sup>1</sup> Statement made by Prof. Olcay Unver, former Deputy Director of the Land and Water Division, UN FAO, and a former member of WLE's Independent Steering Committee, 2014-2019.



## Addressing key challenges and advancing research

In addition to influencing the global discourse on agriculture and food systems, the reflection workshops helped consolidate thinking on the added value of WLE research in specific thematic areas. Discussions helped focus attention on the solutions and innovations that WLE generated over the past decade – which would not have been possible without the funding and research that the program was able to mobilize. These include:

- **Affordable and inclusive insurance for flood-prone farmers:** Addressing the increasing demand for affordable, pro-poor flood insurance products that protect farmer assets and strengthen resilience. This includes index-based flood insurance schemes that use flood modelling data to estimate flood depths and duration and satellite data to help assess flood damage; and a bundled insurance product that provides compensation alongside agricultural inputs such as fertilizers and submergence-tolerant seeds.
- **Pro-poor solar irrigation business models:** Promising frameworks for realizing the transformative potential of solar irrigation pumps – without over-pumping and exacerbating groundwater depletion.
- **Developing and promoting nature-based solutions:** Pursuing development within critical environmental and natural resource limits by recognizing how the integrity of natural systems or managed ecosystems, such as constructed wetlands, can help agriculture flourish while at the same time support water, land and ecosystems.
- **Business models that drive circular economies for food systems:** Identifying opportunities for resource, recovery and reuse using numerous technical and institutional solutions for recovering water, nutrients and energy from domestic waste streams.
- **Restoring degraded landscapes:** Reversing degradation at scale and enhancing ecosystem services and related benefits such as food, energy, clean water, carbon sequestration and livelihoods.
- **Soil spectroscopy:** Groundbreaking technology using soil spectral analysis enables ecosystem health evaluation on a massive scale, paving the way for better targeting of land restoration and more sustainable agriculture.
- **Farmer-led irrigation:** Developing a strong research foundation to consolidate the multiple productivity,

profitability, gender and nutrition benefits that arise from scaling small-scale irrigation.

- **Mainstreaming agrobiodiversity in food systems:** Building an evidence-base and developing tailored decision-support tools with public and private sector partners to leverage the potential of agrobiodiversity for multifunctional agriculture and food systems.

The workshops also acknowledged the critically important work of the CoSAI, which investigates the current state of investments in agricultural innovation and explores how constraints limiting such investments can be overcome. However, WLE researchers felt that, although the CoSAI asked the right questions, it was initiated too late and therefore most of its impact will only become apparent after the program has closed.

## Gender, Youth and Inclusion

WLE initiated important work to improve equity and enhance outreach to marginal groups. The program's cross-cutting theme of Gender, Youth and Inclusion (GYI) produced valuable work and established an important foundation, including frameworks and proven tools and solutions, that can now be utilized by others. The WLE program was also able to merge more technical approaches with social science and gender-focused work, which helped, for instance, to identify scaling opportunities for land restoration and develop gender-equitable flood risk insurance schemes. A focus on labor-saving solutions and innovations emerged to become an important gender entry point. Additionally, GYI enhanced the capacity of some researchers to ensure that systems research became more gender-sensitive and gender-transformative – an important development that will need to be given continued attention during future CGIAR programs and initiatives.

However, funding for GYI research at the sub-program level was often limited, resources were stretched, and available expertise was not always aligned with the needs



Photo: Nana Kofi Acquah / IWMI

of researchers. In fact, not all researchers felt they were given sufficient guidance on how gender sensitivity could be included in their work, suggesting that the program's GYI component was insufficiently integrated across the whole program.

When funding did become more widely available in recent years, most GYI research was allocated to gendered research and this generated significant achievements. However, as a result, research on youth and other marginalized social groups such as indigenous communities tended to be overlooked, with some exceptions. Furthermore, the increased gender research capacity worked mainly at programmatic level and often did not connect sufficiently with projects.

## Thematic gaps

Although the thematic scope of the program was wide and WLE was able to successfully address a large number of challenges and needs, researchers identified several thematic areas they felt on reflection did not receive sufficient attention. Thematic gaps that could have been addressed more, if resource availability would have allowed, included:

- Land tenure and land management, including its links to water tenure.
- Social sciences, human behaviors and the drivers of human behaviors that influence the management of water, land and ecosystems.
- Hydrology, which played a relatively small role, particularly in the program's second phase, since the focus was on landscapes rather than river basins or hydrological processes.
- The interests and needs of consumers and larger producers, and marginal communities such as indigenous communities, youth and disempowered social classes and castes.
- Connecting research at the landscape/watershed/basin levels to communities and livelihood enhancement.
- Analyzing different scaling approaches to facilitate the dissemination and uptake of WLE solutions.

Although there was a lot of continuity between Phase 1 (2012-2016) and Phase 2 (2017-2021), this was not the case in all areas of the program. For instance, the CGIAR WLE [Ecosystem Services and Resilience Framework](#), and research conducted in basin focal regions, were not carried forward into Phase 2.

Furthermore, although WLE will be remembered for its landscape approaches some researchers felt that the program's shift from watersheds and basins to landscapes as a unit of analysis was less specific and much harder to define. Some felt it may have been better to focus on specific basins to show linkages from the farm to basin level or instead to focus analysis at the community and catchment/basin level to better understand linkages with farming systems.

There were also concerns that some of the advances achieved by WLE may be lost in the transition to One CGIAR, specifically research on soil management for restoration and ecosystem services and work on landscape approaches. There is a risk that the expertise WLE has developed will not be carried forward and built upon, and additional efforts may therefore be needed to engage bilateral projects and external organizations.

## Recommendations for One CGIAR

- **Adopt an integrated systems approach:** Consolidate the shift away from research in silos and a narrow focus on single commodities and productivity; stress the importance of considering a holistic perspective of food systems within water, land and ecosystems; and act on the importance of ecosystem health as a foundation of agriculture and food systems.
- **Build on WLE's foundation:** Refine, adapt and strategically promote and scale-up the proven solutions and technologies that WLE has developed with partners to strengthen the climate resilience of communities across the Global South.
- **Invest sufficient time and resources in gender, youth and inclusion:** Ensure that CGIAR research and the solutions it develops reach and improve the lives of marginal communities.
- **Consider research themes that WLE overlooked:** Allocate resources to the study of land and water tenure, social sciences and human behavior, hydrology and scaling approaches.



## Program integration and cross-sectoral collaboration

**This section assesses whether the program's flagship structure enabled integration and cross-sectoral collaboration to help the program deliver on its promise to develop integrated water, land and ecosystem solutions. It also assesses the strengths and weaknesses of the program's broad and complex research agenda.**

WLE was able to collaborate effectively with other CRPs and CGIAR research centers which enabled the program to work across sectors and achieve greater impact. Effective collaboration was also evident in several of the countries WLE was active in. Ethiopia is an example that stands out. Here, WLE partners were able to work together to achieve significant results and policy impact. Furthermore, as the program evolved, members of WLE's Management Committee developed strong relationships and levels of trust amongst themselves, which meant that the committee operated with the interests of the program at heart rather than the individual centers that members represented. These positive developments occurred despite several challenges that the program had to navigate.

## The 'flagship' approach

As with other CRPs, the WLE program was divided into subprograms – referred to as 'flagships' – which focused on specific themes: enhancing sustainable agriculture; restoring degraded landscapes; land and water solutions; rural-urban linkages; and variability, risks and competing uses. While cross-flagship collaboration led to new insights (for example a joint publication on 'impact tracking' in Ethiopia), experience over the course of the past decade revealed several weaknesses associated with this approach. The subprograms too often worked in silos which undermined the program's stated aims of enhancing collaborative and cross-sectoral research and developing integrated approaches and solutions to water, land and ecosystem challenges. This sometimes meant that opportunities to create and further develop synergies were missed, for instance when related work was undertaken in different locations.

Additionally, the core integrating flagship of WLE – Flagship 5 on Enhancing Sustainable Agriculture, intended to be a convening mechanism or umbrella for the program's other flagships – was asked to change and delay its start-up and therefore did not have sufficient time, resources or broader buy-in to fully fulfil its mandate.



Photo: Fani Llauradó / WorldFish

The overall structure of the results framework established for CRPs also made cross-sectoral collaboration challenging. No guidance for cross-sectoral collaboration was established, patterns initiated during the first year were subsequently difficult to change, and the annual CGIAR plans of work and budget and reports were strictly organized by flagship, which made it difficult to plan or report on cross-sectoral results.

Funding mechanisms were an additional impediment. The limited amount of CGIAR funding available under CRPs was carefully planned and agreed between partner centers, Flagship Leaders and CRP management each year. While there are some good examples of collaboration across centers, often CGIAR funding tended to support the core areas of water, land and ecosystem research of each WLE partner.

Early on in the program there were few resources allocated for joint planning and knowledge sharing. When additional funds became available in the last two years of the program, cross-flagship collaboration was encouraged and included as a criterion for funding. There were some successful efforts to encourage collaboration, for example bringing researchers together during science meetings before travel became limited in 2020-21 due to COVID-19. These inspiring meetings facilitated knowledge sharing and quality assurance and led to various follow-up activities such as joint publications. However, the structure of the annual report and CGIAR's MARLO ('Managing Agricultural Research for Learning and Outcomes') reporting system still meant results tended to be reported under a single flagship, and the amount of funding allocated to team building and collaborative activities tended to vary across flagships.

The fact that approximately 80 percent of funding remained bilateral also made it difficult to develop collaborative approaches across flagships and funding streams, since strict rules determined by individual donors often governed how this funding could be allocated, limiting the autonomy and decisions of individual CRPs. Although there are several examples of successful project collaborations between WLE partner centers, these restrictions could often make it difficult for WLE to collaborate with other research programs. Future One CGIAR initiatives are intended to only link to pooled resources, without linkages to bilateral funds. This might help develop a more coherent research program and could make it easier to support collaboration within and between the new CGIAR initiatives, providing that funding allocation, results frameworks and reporting structures are built in such a way that fosters working together.

## The challenges of a broad research agenda

WLE was not afraid of tackling complexity and the challenges faced by farmers on the ground. The program supported work at the interface of disciplines to try and deliver new, innovative, integrated and cross-scale solutions. This required the adoption of a broad and complex research agenda which made it difficult to develop a more succinct conceptual framing – a concise 'elevator pitch' – that was capable of effectively communicating this complexity to external audiences. Research agendas within the individual flagships were also broad and this was complicated even further when already existing bilateral projects were assigned to flagships. Each had their own research agendas and questions and were sometimes difficult to align with WLE's broader objectives. This was a challenge that all CRPs experienced.

Additionally, time poverty was raised as a challenge, and it has grown worse during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several researchers felt they were asked to do too much in too little time.

## Recommendations for One CGIAR

- **Develop structures, incentives and frameworks:** Embed collaborative working across different research themes, issues and data management and sharing.
- **Allocate sufficient resources to enhance collaboration:** Organize regular meetings, workshops and field trips that provide the space for researchers to share knowledge and develop more integrated ways of working.
- **Reform rules governing the allocation of funds:** Allocate funds from pooled resources to provide program managers with more flexibility and autonomy when implementing programmatic activities.
- **Invest time in developing a succinct conceptual framing:** Apply the framing to programs with complex research agendas to help broaden understanding of the program and promote it more strategically to target groups.



## Program management and governance

This section reflects on the effectiveness of the program's management and governance, specifically the efficiency and effectiveness of research support services (human resources and capacity, coordination, administration and financial management) and the program's management structure. It also explores how the program's internal enabling environment could have been improved.

An initial challenge during the early implementation of the program was the fact that each CRP had to define their management structure and process without any framework or guidance to follow. This created difficulties at the beginning of the program but, as governance structures and processes evolved over the course of the program, WLE was able to function effectively and efficiently. This was partly attributed to WLE Program Directors who successfully navigated challenges and focused on practicalities and what could realistically be achieved on the ground. Their management styles also tended to be encouraging, transparent and inclusive.

Research support services were perceived positively. But the PMU was relatively small and embedded in challenging structures related to funding allocation and a meticulous CGIAR reporting process which added to its workload. Researchers also felt that requests from the PMU were often raised at short notice, creating additional pressures. Moreover, staff turnover for some positions was high and time was needed to help new staff members adjust.

Leadership at the flagship level was also constrained by funding structures. Flagship Leaders had little to no influence over bilateral projects, other than approving whether or not these projects would contribute to flagship outcomes and could be considered part of the program. Flagship Leaders were responsible for reviewing and approving proposed plans and budgets for each center's contribution to the flagship each year, although in practice it was not easy for Flagship Leaders to propose major adjustments to the portfolio of activities of contributing centers supported by CGIAR funds. Finally, the number of days allocated to flagship leadership varied for each center – harmonizing this to ensure adequate time allocation for executing the extensive responsibilities of a Flagship Leader would have been useful.

## Recommendations for One CGIAR

- **Provide a framework to guide governance structures and processes:** Support the adoption of proven structures and processes but allow sufficient space for flexibility and adaptation so research-for-development initiatives can respond to challenges more effectively.
- **Ensure PMUs are given sufficient resources and staff:** Ensure they provide researchers with the support they require.
- **Address short-term contracts and high staff turnover:** Help reduce additional pressures on PMUs.
- **Give Flagship Leaders sufficient time:** Ensure they can fully execute their responsibilities to the research program.



Photo: WLE



# Reporting, monitoring, evaluation and learning

**This section analyzes how effectively reporting, monitoring and evaluation were used for assessing progress and supporting programmatic learning, and explores whether external reviews and evaluations supported adaptive management and course correction. It suggests how learning could have been improved to strengthen WLE's impacts, and also identifies the efforts needed to enhance the management of research data.**

## The reporting process and system

WLE adopted one of the two available CGIAR planning and reporting systems, MARLO, in 2016. MARLO came under criticism from users across the CGIAR for several reasons, including its slowness, awkward interface and difficulty analyzing large quantities of data. WLE's approach when setting up MARLO was to use individual projects as the level of activities to report on. As a result, WLE researchers reported on more than 100 projects each year, all with multiple deliverables. This approach proved burdensome for researchers, as well as for the PMU and Flagship Leaders, with insufficient time available for reporting, review and quality control. WLE's approach to mitigate this and support researchers was to ensure full-time MARLO support from within the PMU. The timing of the annual reporting and planning process also meant that plans for the year ahead had to be formulated before performance had been reported on for the previous year. This made adaptive management and implementing corrective measures challenging.

Despite these frustrations, however, the system was an improvement on previous efforts to capture the outcomes of CGIAR initiatives, and facilitated a more disciplined, rigorous and harmonized approach to reporting on outputs and outcomes, all of which are publicly available on the [CGIAR Dashboard](#). A particularly important advancement was the development of Outcome Impact Case Reports – or OICRs – which documented the outcomes of CRPs and have been used by funders, the CGIAR system and researchers to demonstrate the reach and impact of CRPs.

## Accountability versus learning

While the CGIAR has placed more emphasis on monitoring and evaluation, it now needs to ensure that learning becomes an integral part of this process to ensure impact. Monitoring within WLE was often more about compliance rather than becoming more introspective and reflecting on critical lessons to adapt and improve

the program's implementation. It was felt that the end of Phase 1 was a missed opportunity to reflect on progress and identify where improvements were needed to enhance WLE's performance moving forward into Phase 2.

CGIAR external evaluations were in some cases also considered to be a missed opportunity. Researchers felt there was limited engagement with evaluators and that they were given insufficient time to implement recommendations after an evaluation was completed, limiting any learning potential. The opportunity to facilitate learning and influence the planning and implementation of One CGIAR initiatives was also limited because the most recent evaluation was published towards the end of the program when the planning of One CGIAR initiatives was already well underway, restricting the time available to digest findings and, if needed, change tack.

Monitoring progress and learning was further limited by the theory of change, which was developed at the outset of the program and reviewed or adapted only infrequently by some flagships. There were also too few opportunities during the course of the program for researchers to share knowledge and learn from one another – which needs to be addressed and integrated into programmatic activities during the transition to One CGIAR, including more informal networking opportunities. Additionally, there were few opportunities to analyze important lessons from the work being implemented by partners, and limited time to think through how this learning could be captured.

Opportunities for learning could have been facilitated through the allocation of additional resources to follow up and assess programmatic activities. Fortunately, One CGIAR plans to address this shortcoming through regular stage gating and allocating more resources to monitoring, evaluation and learning. Future research initiatives could also benefit from outcome evaluations that were undertaken by WLE. Evaluations in [India](#) and [Ethiopia](#) and those assessing resource, recovery and reuse initiatives in [Ghana](#) and [Sri Lanka](#) were useful and demonstrated impressive outcomes that informed high-level policy and decision making. These could potentially serve as a template for One CGIAR evaluations.

## Data management challenges

Improvements were also needed to strengthen data management. Responsibility for research data officially lay with CGIAR research centers. Each had its own data management system in place – and over the course of the WLE program these varied from more advanced systems to those still being developed or undergoing regular change. While WLE produced data, centers provided the infrastructure to manage the data, meaning that it was difficult for the program's management team

to understand and control processes of research data management. This included WLE attribution to data originating from the program.

Guidance on data attribution or metadata and wider information sharing was inconsistent across WLE projects, and the program was not able to implement a core set of data management strategies to assess programmatic performance and ensure wide dissemination of data. Generating consistent metadata under these conditions proved difficult and the program occasionally lost or was left with non-curated datasets. In order to address these challenges in future research-for-development programs, WLE has produced a [brief to capture lessons learned](#) on the collection, management and use of research data. Recommendations are also provided in the text box below.

## Recommendations for One CGIAR

- **Develop a more effective and efficient reporting system:** Remove the need to focus on every output and integrate rewards and incentives to enhance the quality and timeliness of programmatic reporting.
- **Clarify responsibilities:** To more effectively manage research data and support data exchange.
- **Provide guidance:** To help researchers more effectively manage and attribute data.
- **Allocate sufficient resources and capacity:** To manage, document and publish research data. Budgets must enable projects to ensure that all research data – regardless of its scale, form or topic – are findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable.
- **Ensure that learning is an integral part of monitoring and evaluation:** Be prepared to admit failure and reflect on the lessons that can help initiate positive changes and enhance programmatic implementation.
- **Maximize learning opportunities:** Ensure external evaluations are timely and involve researchers working alongside evaluators, and provide formal and informal opportunities for knowledge exchange.

## Communications

This section assesses the effectiveness of WLE's communication function, and the dissemination and promotion of the program's research outputs. It also identifies what the program could have done differently to further enhance its visibility and performance, and any additional support communications could have provided.

### Changing the discourse on food, agriculture and the environment

WLE communications successfully translated and repackaged WLE science and was ahead of the communication departments in many CGIAR centers, and other CRPs, in terms of developing new methods for promoting and disseminating research. This included the [Thrive blog](#), which was designed to change the discourse around food, agriculture and the environment, and provided a space for scientists to think out loud, even when they held contradictory opinions.

The [website](#) was also perceived favorably and the program was able to build impressive networks on social media. The communications team consistently produced quality content that did a good job of translating research concisely without oversimplifying the science.



Photo: WLE

## Lessons learned

However, resources and capacity constraints limited impact and reach. Despite being well organized and producing quality content, there was insufficient investment in communications within the CRP and significant turnover of staff. Additionally, researchers felt that communications could have been more innovative and strategic in some areas, for example engaging with external media more frequently and effectively and developing more multimedia knowledge products and infographics. Communications could also have become better aligned with the communication departments of CGIAR centers to maximize the reach of WLE knowledge products and promotional campaigns.

There was also some frustration that communications did not always align with the needs of researchers. For instance, by focusing on news and compelling stories, the program may have overlooked the importance of research synthesis products – a need which has been addressed in recent months to help secure the program's legacy and influence future research, investments and policies (See box 'Science-driven solutions'). During the transition to One CGIAR it is vitally important that researchers develop a closer and more collaborative relationship with communications staff to ensure both are working towards the same goals.

### Science-driven solutions

A synthesis of research and innovations that address the world's critical water, land and ecosystem challenges. [Science-driven solutions](#) highlight key insights, recommendations and solutions produced during the past decade of WLE research, with the aim of influencing future decisions, investments and research.

## A more strategic direction

A closer relationship could have helped researchers approach communications more strategically to ensure their research targeted the right audiences. However, researchers may need incentives to do so, given the time and energy needed to invest in communications activities. A more collaborative relationship could have involved communicators supporting research in alternative ways, for instance contributing to and writing proposals to enhance their appeal. Additionally, the involvement

of communications staff during the planning and initial implementation of the WLE program could have helped develop a more concise conceptual framing – thereby helping to more effectively position the program with target audiences such as donors, investors and policymakers.

A more strategic direction might also have involved less emphasis on blogging – given the amount of content on the internet and the increasing competition for people's attention. With hindsight, the program could have focused less on quantity and more on producing in-depth quality content – thereby freeing up time to focus on alternative knowledge products and promotional activities that could have delivered greater impact with key audiences. Finally, the program could have developed key performance indicators to measure the reach of WLE communications – supporting a process of learning that would have enabled communicators to strengthen their impact and more effectively adapt to changes in target audience behaviors.

### Recommendations for One CGIAR

- **Ensure communication becomes more innovative:** Invest more in external media engagement and more multimedia products and infographics.
- **Ensure communications works more strategically with researchers:** Contribute to proposals and concept framing to position programs more effectively.
- **Develop key performance indicators:** Measure the reach and impact of promotional activities and implement a learning agenda that would enable communications to strengthen its impact and adapt to changes in target audience behaviors.
- **Invest in communications:** Ensure future research-for-development programs are given sufficient support to strategically target key audiences.



## Source

WLE Reflection Workshop of the Management Committee and Independent Steering Committee, November 10 and 12, 2021.

## Acknowledgments

This research was carried out as part of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) and supported by funders contributing to the CGIAR Trust Fund ([www.cgiar.org/funders/](http://www.cgiar.org/funders/)). CGIAR is a global research partnership for a food-secure future.

WLE would like to thank members of the program's Management Committee and Independent Steering Committee for their contributions, in particular Pay Drechsel, Roseline Remans and Anthony Whitbread who commented on early drafts of this brief.

## Contacts

CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems ([wle@cgiar.org](mailto:wle@cgiar.org)).

## Suggested citation

Durrell, J.; Uhlenbrook, S.; Ringler, C.; Greatrix, E. 2021. *Reflections on a decade of innovative research-for-development: Capturing lessons and insights from the implementation of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) – to help inform the development of future research programs and the transition to One CGIAR*. Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Water Management Institute (IWMI). CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE). 12p. (WLE Legacy Brief Series 3)



Photo: Hamish John Appleby / IWMI



RESEARCH  
PROGRAM ON  
Water, Land and  
Ecosystems

LED BY:  
**IWMI**  
International Water  
Management Institute

The CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) is a global research-for-development program connecting partners to deliver sustainable agriculture solutions that enhance our natural resources – and the lives of people that rely on them. WLE brings together 11 CGIAR centers, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the RUAF Global Partnership, and national, regional and international partners to deliver solutions that change agriculture from a driver of environmental degradation to part of the solution. WLE is led by the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and partners as part of CGIAR, a global research partnership for a food-secure future.

### CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems

International Water Management Institute (IWMI)  
127 Sunil Mawatha, Pelawatta  
Battaramulla, Sri Lanka  
Email: [wle@cgiar.org](mailto:wle@cgiar.org)  
Website: [wle.cgiar.org](http://wle.cgiar.org)  
Thrive blog: <https://wle.cgiar.org/thrive>

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:

