

## Update – Center External Review Scoping Activity

### Purpose

This document provides an update on the Center External Review (CER) Scoping Activity of the Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service (IAES), partnered with the Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC). This update summarizes the 2025 Center Scoping Activity undertaken by IAES to prepare for and pilot a renewed approach for external review of centers, following the historical practice of external program management reviews. The purpose of the update is to provide information about 2025 progress, and context for the 2026 and outyear proposed approach to institutionalize a CER mechanism.

### Background

- At its 21st meeting, the CGIAR System Council approved the consolidated 2025-2027 workplan and budget of Advisory Bodies (SC/M21/DP5). This plan included a scoping activity related to the reinstatement of external center reviews.

### Action Requested

The System Council is requested to consider the update and raise comments and ideas during session 12 regarding its demand for such a process.

<p><b>Document category:</b> Working document of the System Council. There is no restriction on the circulation of this document</p>
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## ACTIVITY UPDATE – CENTER EXTERNAL REVIEW SCOPING

### Executive Summary

The 2025 Center External Review (CER) Scoping Activity, led by CGIAR’s Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service (IAES) in partnership with the Independent Science for Development Council (ISDC), advanced the development of a renewed system-wide mechanism for independent assessment of CGIAR Centers, following the historical practice of external program and management reviews. Responding to interest in reinstating center-level external reviews voiced by SIMEC at several of its meetings leading up to the 2025-2027 business cycle, the scoping activity finalized core tools, methods, and guidance needed to pilot the CER approach.

Throughout 2025, IAES engaged with ISDC, with the volunteer pilot center leadership, consultants, and governance stakeholders. IAES produced and had peer reviewed deliverables, including a standardized Terms of Reference, a Guidance Note for external review panels, and a standardized Self-Assessment Tool. SIMEC representatives also received a draft CER program Scope of Work for preliminary input. The International Water Management Institute (IWMI) expressed strong readiness in piloting the CER, voiced by both the incoming Board chair and Director General, and IWMI has proceeded with the Self-Assessment phase applying the standardized Self-Assessment Tool.

The scoping activity is completed, and, assuming the IWMI Self-Assessment process to be completed by end of 2025, one-third of the pilot would have been effectively initiated. In September 2025, SIMEC requested pausing the pursuit of the pilot application pending completion of SIMEC Advisory Bodies review; assuming resumption of the pilot, this shifts full pilot implementation to early 2026. Work in 2026 would include completing the IWMI review, validating tools following the pilot, and through an *ad hoc* consultative group and other avenues, socializing the tested CER package. Looking ahead, IAES proposes scaling the approach to two to three CERs per year, including one in 2026 post pilot, subject to resources. In the long term, the CER mechanism is expected to strengthen accountability, improve Center governance and performance, bolster coherent assurance across CGIAR, and bridge the work of IAES Evaluation Function and ISDC.

### 1. Background

At its 21st meeting, the CGIAR System Council approved the consolidated 2025-2027 workplan and budget of IAES, comprising the ISDC, Standing Panel on Impact Assessment (SPIA), their respective secretariats, and the IAES Evaluation Function (SC/M21/DP5). This plan includes scoping related to the reinstatement of Center Reviews. This update summarizes the 2025 Center Scoping Activity undertaken by IAES to prepare for and pilot a renewed CER approach. The activity supports System Council interest, per SIMEC, in reviving center-level external reviews and developing tools and guidance for broader rollout, as well as interest voiced by a sample of center counterparts during planning consultation stages. The purpose of the update is to provide information about 2025 progress, and context for 2026 and outyear proposed approach to institutionalize CER.

### 2. What’s Been Completed

- **Stakeholder Engagement:**

- IAES director (in her capacity as manager of the activity), ISDC chair and selected members of IAES staff (e.g., leads of Evaluation function and ISDC secretariat), consultants, and IWMI leadership (N.B. scoping activity demonstrated a keen, shared interest between IWMI Board Chair and Director General to pilot the CER tools) engaged throughout the process.
- Additional discussions occurred with governance stakeholders across multiple centers and governance entities; in accordance with a pause in work, no specific consultative group was established in 2025.
- **Evaluative Evidence and Benchmarking Review:**
  - The central element of the CER scoping was review of evaluation evidence in the past, to determine readiness for use in CER processes. A review of existing evidence that referred to centers, focusing on the pilot center IWMI, was undertaken using survey data from the [Platform Evaluations](#), and [2024 Science Group Evaluations](#) as well as a limited number of anonymized, relevant interview transcripts. The review supported the view that, while CGIAR independent evaluations generate useful and relevant insights regarding the organizational effectiveness of centers, there is a gap in the scope of commissioned evaluation structures (portfolio and corporate evaluations) that prevents a focus on centers specifically. Evaluations commissioned by System Council through IAES of CGIAR programming are cognizant of contextual factors determining the success of programs (e.g. thematic mandates, geography, domain). It is evident that one of these factors is the centers themselves. Some key elements pertaining to centers were: relative strengths in MELIA; collaboration and competition between centers; regional and domain expertise; policy influence and national integration; incentive structures and resistance to change; continuity and institutional memory; organizational culture; focus on scaling; and data accessibility and public goods. There is currently no systematic process to incorporate and manage center-specific insights and recommendations and they are not currently integrated into the [Evaluation and Management Response Actions Tracker](#).
  - Literature review and expert inputs [from, inter alia, Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC, UK), High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (HCERES, France), African Quality Rating Mechanism (AQRM, continental)], provided benchmarks, as did review of the past EPMR approach.
- **Key Deliverables Produced:**
  - Concept Note and Progress Report shared with SIMEC representatives (August).
  - Terms of Reference adapted for center-level context and reviewed among involved parties in IAES, ISDC and IWMI, as well as external experts.
  - Guidance Note (methods) for External Review Panel, draft.
  - Self-Assessment Tool developed; IWMI has been internally piloting it.

- Adaptation of CGIAR Evaluability Assessment tool for Center review ([tool](#)).
- Early engagement with IAES experts, from the IAES/ISDC roster, to refine tools and prepare for panel involvement during pilot.
- Draft proposal for the five-year Center External Review program (Scope of Work) tested with SIMEC chair and member.
- **Pause in process –Consultative Group and Pilot:**
  - Due to the Advisory Bodies review, SIMEC advised in September pausing SIMEC participation in a consultative group and, overall, pausing the suite of pilot activities. This pause allows a fuller discussion in the context of 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting of System Council regarding future demand and interest in reinstating external reviews of centers, and further discussion with broader stakeholders (e.g., Center boards and others). Thus, while having finalized the core scoping stage deliverables, IAES has accordingly accounted for the pilot originally planned for fourth quarter 2025 in the proposed 2026 planning.

### 3. Scoping Stage Deliverables, Summary and Next Steps

Pending the outcome of the SIMEC review of Advisory Bodies (SC23) and 2026 workplan approval, the remainder of the pilot would be implemented January-May 2026, with final suite of tools and pilot learning report at prepared for the 24<sup>th</sup> meeting of System Council. This will build upon:

- Core materials delivered during scoping stage (TOR, Guide, Tools).
- IWMI (independently) tested Self-Assessment process and report (ongoing).

### 4. Proposed deliverables (2026)

- Execution of the IWMI pilot review. Management Response (MR), and publication of results of the IWMI Review.
- Finalization of learning and reflection questions for the pilot through a newly-convened CER consultative group (being a reference group comprising SIMEC, Integrated Partnership Board (IPB), ISDC, IA, General Assembly of Centers Board chair and Director General representatives).
- Development of the full CER timeline and socialization of refined materials after the pilot (see Annex 1 for future scope of work summary).
- One additional CER in 2026 (one additional review), scaling to 2–3 reviews per year, capacity permitting (See Annex).

### 5. Issues or Risks

- **Pause in Pilot is Prolonged:** SIMEC’s advisory (Sep 2025), was to pause the pilot due to the ongoing Advisory Bodies review. IWMI has determined nonetheless to proceed with the application of the already-developed Self-Assessment Tool in 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2025. Given the draft SIMEC Report articulates strong demand for the CER as a priority activity of IAES, the

risk is viewed as low and the outcome manageable. A longer than anticipated pause in programming would result in one (pilot) CER produced in 2026, with no second Review in 2026.

- **Resource and Demand Management:** Starting in 2027, to ensure coverage of all centers in a five-year span, would entail planning for two to three CERs per year, with concomitant staff (in IAES and Centers), and financial resources. The risk of not obtaining sufficiency of resources is moderate but would be manageable through the reduced throughput in IAES. While the IAES planning documents prioritize CER, the budget constraints in CGIAR, including IAES, are acute. Lower than anticipated resources would be managed by reducing the number of CERs per year.
- **Dependency on Governance Processes:** Progress on the learning process surrounding the pilot and tools, and the overall program of CERs, depends on the continuing demand from System Council and Center Boards and the availability and engagements of relevant stakeholders in the CER consultative group from January.

#### 6. Additional Notes

- Strong historical justification: CERs revive the legacy of EPMRs, which functioned as a “full health check” for centers. A recent sample from a like-minded agency is the [WorldVeg external review \(2023\)](#).
- Demand emerged from System Council (via SIMEC) and from centers themselves (IWMI for 2025; IITA has expressed interest for 2026; Alliance audit finance and risk committee voiced interest without a set date).
- The scoping process also serves to address a fragmented assurance landscapes across CGIAR by designing a center-focused, integrative review model.
- The investment in the scoping activity has entailed, in addition to a level of effort of approx. 10% IAES director, IAES staff and ISDC member time, a total expenditure projected by end of year of 15K. Due to the requested pause in the pilot, approximately 100K should be carried forward to 2026 to complete the pilot. This carry forward was factored in to the proposed 2026 budget.

#### ANNEX: SCOPE OF WORK FOR OUTYEAR PROGRAM OF CERS (SUMMARY)

The **CGIAR Center External Review (CER)** is a revitalized, system-wide mechanism for independent assessment of CGIAR Centers. Building on the legacy of the External Program and Management Reviews (EPMRs), CERs offer a modernized, structured approach to evaluating Center performance, governance, strategy, and research quality within CGIAR’s Integrated Partnership model. The CER mechanism is designed to strengthen accountability, reinforce learning, and ensure coherence across the assurance landscape.

The **objectives** of the CER Program are fourfold: (1) provide independent assurance to Center Boards on performance and strategic positioning; (2) support organizational learning and adaptation through actionable, formative recommendations; (3) enhance accountability to the

CGIAR System Council, funders, and the Integrated Partnership Board; and (4) institutionalize a harmonized **five-year review cycle** across all Centers. The 2025 scoping and pilot development, implemented by IAES with ISDC collaboration, has finalized methods and tools. At the request of SIMEC, pilot implementation will shift to 2026 to allow fuller system-wide alignment.

**Scope and Analytical Framework.** CERs review the preceding five years of Center operations across strategy, governance, management systems, research-for-development performance, financial sustainability, partnerships, and compliance with CGIAR policies. The approach integrates two core frameworks: **Quality of Research for Development (QoR4D)** and the CGIAR Evaluation Policy and Framework (2022), which build on the **OECD-DAC evaluation criteria**, ensuring alignment with international standards, , and expectations for independence, rigor, and utility. **MOPAN** is strongly cross-referenced.

**Process.** Each review spans approximately six months and follows a standardized sequence: preparation; Center-led self-assessment; panel desk review and inception analysis; a one-week field mission; and final reporting, followed by public disclosure and management response. Key deliverables include an Inception Note, Self-Assessment Report, and a concise **Center External Review Report** with no more than ten actionable recommendations (aligned with a core recommendation in the Management Response System Review). [NB: A post-pilot learning note will support refinement of tools and processes.]

**Governance and Roles.** Center Boards commission the reviews, agree on Terms of Reference (employing a standard format and questions), nominate priority areas for deeper inquiry, and approve the Management Response [[portal](#)]. The System Council oversees the scoping and pilot phase, ensures strategic alignment, and reviews cross-Center learning. The Integrated Partnership Board (IPB) contributes through joint governance roles and participation in a CER consultative group alongside SIMEC and ISDC. IAES manages review execution, methodology, and quality assurance, engaging from its roster an interdisciplinary external panel of subject-matter, governance, and evaluation experts. Center management leads self-assessment and participates in validation and follow-up.

**Methods and Quality Assurance.** Consistent with the Evaluation Policy, CERs use mixed methods to collect and analyze data, including interviews, surveys, focus groups, desk reviews, and bibliometrics ([Technical note](#)), supported by a standardized tool for self-assessment and associated report template, and external panel guidance materials. Triangulation across evidence sources and iterative validation with stakeholders reinforces objectivity and robustness. Per CER, a Steering Group comprising IAES, ISDC, the panel chair, and the Center liaison ensures methodological credibility, integrity and smooth implementation.

**Timeline and Scale-Up.** One review requires six months. IAES estimates capacity for **two reviews per year** from 2026–2028, scaling to **three per year** in 2029–2030, enabling full CGIAR-wide coverage before the five-year cycle restarts.

**Budget.** A CER costs approximately **USD 105,000-115,000** per Center, (not including fully loaded IAES staff costs and ISDC honoraria). Inclusive of IAES and ISDC level of effort, the projected five-year CGIAR-wide CER program is estimated at **USD 2.8–3.0 million**. The 2025 scoping and pilot

were funded by System Council through the IAES workplan, under the Evaluation Function line item.

**Expected Outcomes.** The CER Program will provide independent, evidence-based assessments of Center performance and governance; strengthen accountability and transparency; deliver focused, actionable recommendations; and establish a consistent CGIAR assurance mechanism framed around Centers. The pilot phase will support refinement of tools and approaches to ensure a high-quality, scalable approach ready for rollout across all Centers from mid-2026 onward.