



ISDC External Review of 2025- 30 Portfolio

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Portfolio Narrative

Section 1 presents ISDC commentary on codesign.

Section 2 focuses on high-level themes of the Portfolio Narrative.

Section 3 comments on the Annexes.

Methods

- Consensus-building during a three-day in-person meeting of the current Council members
- Assessments are rooted in the *Quality of Research for Development in the CGIAR Context*.
 - Elements: **relevance, scientific credibility, legitimacy, and effectiveness.**
- Other ISDC resources:
 - Comparative Advantage Analysis
 - Inclusive Innovation
 - Megatrends



The new Portfolio structure appears sensible and manageable and increases clarity of where CGIAR allocates its resources.

However, inappropriate timing and a lack of critical Information...



Science

Budget
Scenarios

Meaningful
Risk Analyses

Unclear or
Unsubstantiated
Assumptions

...didn't leave much science for ISDC to review.

Sequence and Rollout

- The proposal reviews were finalized before the Narrative was available.
- Timing created a sequencing challenge within the review process.
- Reviewers were unaware that the Inception Phase is engineered to address gaps related to MELIA, risk management, CA, etc.
- Much is to be completed during the Inception Phase.

Limitations of Narrative Review

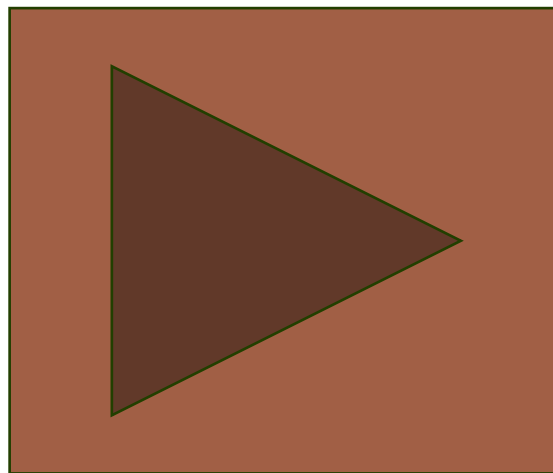
Funding the Portfolio: Pooled & Bilateral Questions

- No clarity on modalities of integrating bilateral and pooled funding.
- How will CGIAR manage the integration of various funding sources?
- What levers will the Chief Scientist deploy in their work with Centers considering the partnership structure and lack of line authority?
- How will CGIAR prevent and/or manage competition among Centers for pooled funding?
- How will scientists be incentivized to work seamlessly within a pooled and bilateral system?

Research Ethics & Risk Management

- Narrative touches on risks but this is underdeveloped.
- Proposals must clearly outline risk mitigation to allow for the assessment of feasibility & preparedness.
- Currently, the proposals lack adequate risk analyses, which are apparently earmarked for the Inception Phase.
- Risks affect entire Portfolio's scientific credibility.

Video of Process



Right click to open link

13 Proposals Reviewed

Science Programs	Accelerators	Asset
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Climate Action • Multifunctional Landscapes • Policy Innovations • Better Diets and Nutrition • Breeding for Tomorrow • Sustainable Farming • Sustainable Animal and Aquatic Foods • Food Frontiers and Security • Scaling for Impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gender Equality and Inclusion • Digital Transformation • Capacity Sharing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Genebanks

More focus on science

- Details on the actual research to be conducted is lacking. Hence, **ISDC could only assess the foundations of the enabling environment within which the actual research will be conducted.**
- The proposal **template was not ideally for the Accelerators** as it was specifically designed for research proposals.
- The **appendices varied significantly in size and details**, ranging from no appendices to elaborate additional information.

Better leveraging Success

- The proposals provide limited information on achievements from 2022–2024 and how these influenced and formed the foundations for the proposed work.
- Although listening sessions are useful engagement tools, they do not equate to codesign.

Capitalizing on Comparative Advantage

- Some proposals effectively interpreted the CA template to realistically summarize the Programs' and the Accelerators' CAs. Others focused solely on CGIAR strengths and the self-assessment tended to overstate these strengths.
- ISDC recommends using an externally facilitated process when conducting a comparative advantage analysis. This would prevent unintentional bias and maintain an independent perspective.

Cover all Impact Areas through better System Integration

- Environmental health and biodiversity Impact Area is a gap and potential area for improvement.
- The Portfolio review identified a research gap in water systems, which receives insufficient attention.
- There is a risk that issues of mixed systems (e.g., crop-livestock, silvo-pastoral) tradeoffs and synergies, resource management, and biodiversity will "fall between the cracks" unless there is strong cross-program engagement

Emphasizing Youth and Social Inclusion

- Youth is almost absent across the other 12 proposals. The Accelerator primarily focuses on gender and there are missed opportunities for social inclusion of indigenous groups and knowledge.
- A more deliberate culture change within CGIAR is needed to shift from a traditionally linear and technology-driven approach to a systems approach by learning from the populations its research is targeted at.

Focus on neglected crops

- To deliver on the mission, orphan crops* will require more emphasis in “Breeding for Tomorrow” and “Scaling for Impact Programs”.
- The Portfolio appears to lack sufficient focus on pulses, a critical crop group for food security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture.
- * *“opportunity crops” is the terminology used by the Initiative “Vision for Adapted Crops and Soils”*

Strengthening Accountability Elements During Inception Phase

Risk Management

- ISDC was unable to assess this specific QoR4D criterion because of the lack of information provided.
- Risk management is essential for good portfolio management.. The lack of such a framework affected the scoring of the individual Programs and Accelerators.

MELIA

- Some proposals lack details on how external evaluation findings will be incorporated, while others omit evaluation recommendations entirely.
- There is a noticeable absence of baseline data, key performance indicators (KPIs), and Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound objectives (SMART), all of which are required for tracking progress and ensuring accountability.





Thank you

Further Feedback – Narrative Review

Social Inclusion & Capacity Sharing

CGIAR could benefit from more self-reflection and learning from external organizations regarding social inclusion, not just gender, but also indigenous groups and youth. Capacity sharing is primarily externally focused, training partners and others. Will there be an internal component?

Geography & Scaling

The map could be elaborated by adding a critical factor: the size and intended reach of those Programs in terms of funding and people. How will geographies with little Program crossover be managed across pooled and bilateral funding?

Interdependencies

Better assess the interdependencies and tradeoffs between Programs dealing with mixed farming systems, particularly crop-livestock systems.

Role of Accelerators

An Accelerator definition and a clear mandate in CGIAR's context would be beneficial.

Merge of Breeding for Tomorrow & Genebanks

ISDC concluded that a merger of the Program and the Asset is an organizational decision rather than a scientific matter. The weaknesses identified in the Genebanks proposal will not be solved via a merger.

Further Feedback – Narrative Review



Photo: N. Palmer/The Alliance

CGIAR's Role Among Partners

- How will private sector engagement and intellectual property be managed?
- How will partners be vetted to ensure alignment and risk mitigation?

Comparative Advantage

- CGIAR should be compared to similar organizations, particularly regarding human capital input. Additionally, the analysis should include what capital partners contribute and identify the types of partnerships needed to strengthen CGIAR's comparative advantage.

Theory of Change and Impact

- Why were assumptions not included in the Portfolio-level Theory of Change? Most proposals did include assumptions related to the outcome level. However, assumptions at all levels of the Theory of Change—from input to impact—will be important to explore, record, and monitor.



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Science Programs

Climate Action



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Strengths

- Addresses existential challenges to vulnerable populations
- Solid scientific framework
- Comprehensive in framing its Areas of Work, outputs, and outcomes
- Climate Hub (AoWI) → Key strength of this Program
- Ambitious Program
- Has the potential of generating transformational change

Areas of Improvement

- Inclusive frameworks focus largely on beneficiaries of research, rather than including them in the co-generation of knowledge, particularly
 - when it comes to Indigenous people and knowledge
- Theory of Change: Research questions are generic and global, providing little room for scrutiny
- MELIA approach: Clarity is needed on how learning and adaptive management will be accomplished

Multifunctional Landscapes



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Strengths

- Integrated systems focus creates economic “pull toward change,” enabling new business models
- Section 8 clearly outlines linkages; recommend adding a clear integration strategy in the inception document
- Section 6.4 (policy) is strong; recommend coordination with sections 6.3 (markets) and 6.2 (governance) to develop actionable innovation systems

Areas of Improvement

- Requires clarity on how AoW 6 integrates outputs from AoWs 1–3; recommend aligning AoWs 4, 5, and 7
- Section 6.7 lacks specificity on knowledge products and alignment with CGIAR definitions
- Section 6.1 shows promise in scaling solutions but takes a top-down approach to agroecological concepts.
- Needs clearer climate strategies, considerations for farmer profitability and risk management

Strengths

- Each AoW demand driven based on stakeholder requests
- Codesigned, integrating collaborative partnerships
- Plan for deep engagement with policymaking/advising clients
- Integration of
 - *Ex-ante* forecasting of policy needs
 - *Ex-post* assessment of policy
 - Policy Hub translation
- Well identified research gaps, and adaptability through foresighting

Areas of Improvement

- Proposal does not address risk. Sociopolitical risk will substantially impact key pieces of proposal
- Markets and Nexus initiatives provide little detail on methods or ToC
- AoWs have substantial overlap particularly in skillsets
- The CA analysis is very shallow

Better Diets and Nutrition



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Strengths

- The comprehensive food system approach to improving diet quality
- Bangladesh case study shows how impact can be achieved at scale. This needs to be emulated in other countries to deliver the ambitious targets
- The proposal integrates activities and research questions about cost effectiveness into some AoW

Areas of Improvement

- Clearer prioritization of AoWs and countries
- Strengthen climate change and sustainability agenda at all levels
- Revisit AoW 1, placing consumers more centrally into the ToC. Explanation needed on how food environments can be realistically changed and transformation catalyzed
- More detail needed on the specific research being proposed and how it will be conducted

Breeding for Tomorrow



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Strengths

- Breeding resource description and ToC have a clear 2030 vision, focusing on empowerment, access, and sustainability
- Advanced breeding technologies like AI and GloMIP accelerate resilient crop development
- Market-driven approach aligns with national goals and supports food security

Areas of Improvement

- Shared platforms risk data issues, requiring investment and training
- ToC in Fig. 1 lacks alignment with outputs and program integration
- Standardization poses unintended risks to diversification. Consider incorporating more diversified crop varieties tailored to specific environmental and markets.
- Clarification is needed on farmer involvement, partnerships to advance seed policies and market linkages

Sustainable Farming



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Strengths

- CA analysis well developed
- Actions are based on previous projects and programs
- Emphasis on data, AI, and digital tools for harnessing farmer knowledge, expertise, and market information is well developed

Areas of Improvement

- Risk assessment is lacking
- Farmers are treated as homogenous, with insufficient emphasis on the need to engage with them and with other service providers as true partners
- The gender-responsive approach is vague, needing more detail and integration across AoW, drawing on lessons from previous initiatives.

Sustainable Animal and Aquatic Foods



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Strengths

- Presents a clear, integrated vision across technical, environmental, social, and economic dimensions
- Strong focus on gender and social inclusion, particularly through the GSI Accelerator, ensures equitable access and impact for marginalized communities
- The program leverages CGIAR's infrastructure, partnerships, and advanced technologies like genomics and digital platforms, positioning it for impactful outcomes

Areas of Improvement

- The proposal lacks concrete examples of how stakeholder feedback shaped program design, limiting its credibility
- Geographic focus is limited, with some regions, especially in Africa, underrepresented
- The risk framework needs deeper analysis of unintended ecological and socioeconomic consequences, especially when introducing new technologies in fragile environments

Food Frontiers and Security



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Strengths

- The proposal provides an excellent discussion of the priority-setting process
 - Demand driven
 - Evidence based
 - Connected to geographic needs
- Geographic targets selected based on
 - Risks
 - Existing partnerships
 - Strategic new areas
- Future Food Systems Lab (AoWI)
 - Collaborative purposeful convening
 - Innovation focused

Areas of Improvement

- Lack of depth and detail in research questions
- Research knowledge gaps not well documented
- Gender discussed in terms of research targets, but not inputs, leadership or researchers
- Geographic risks are touched on, but no discussion of risk more generally or strategies to manage risks that are inherent
- CA not clear

Scaling for Impact Program



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Strengths

- The proposal integrates scaling across CGIAR and agri-food sectors, with a strong, holistic approach and CGIAR's unique capability to manage research and mobilize partnerships
- Field-level focus and national integration are strong, with 17 Catalyst Countries based on research and partnerships
- Clear vision and framework, with a well-defined theory of change supported by evidence and impact pathways

Areas of Improvement

- Ambitious goals face institutional and political challenges. A deeper analysis of adoption barriers and conflicting incentives is needed.
- The \$5 billion financing goal lacks sufficient analysis. More detail on the scope and required skills for scaling is needed.
- Risk Management and MELIA need strengthening. A more robust risk analysis and feasible MELIA framework



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Accelerators



Gender Equality and Inclusion



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Strengths

- Proposal is really strong on Gender. The CA of CGIAR is clear and well articulated.
- Sub-AoW 1.1's focus on gender norms is valuable and could benefit from insights like those from ODI's ALIGN project.
- Strong methods, especially in Sub-AoW2.1, using random variations for impact evaluation.

Areas of Improvement

- Proposal is weak on youth and social inclusion, with insufficient focus on youth issues and a lack of expertise in social inclusion.
- The proposal assumes broad buy-in from actors, which is not guaranteed. Some AoWs lack clear plans for gaining support from key stakeholders
- Risk management is insufficient, with a lack of strategies for key risks like political resistance.

Digital Transformation



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Strengths

- Demand-driven, human-centered use cases refined with end users through structured consultations across CGIAR, partners, and private companies
- Commitment to partnerships, leveraging CGIAR's knowledge and partner strengths in technology, resources, and local context
- Emphasis on FAIR data principles

Areas of Improvement

- Vague objectives without SMART criteria, increasing failure risk; climate metrics needed
- Weak linkages with other Science Programs, with limited integration in Gender and Climate Change
- Insufficient risk management, including staff engagement, data security, energy use, and safeguarding stakeholders and their data

Capacity Sharing



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Strengths

- Fostering of strategic partnerships to address global food, land and water challenges through 3 distinct AoW – advancing mutual learning and capacity sharing particularly with partners in the Global South
- The accelerator's added value is clearly defined – addressing the fragmentation of capacity development efforts within and beyond CGIAR contributing to the realization of the 5 key impact areas.

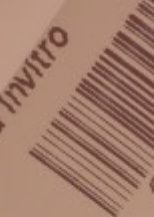
Areas of Improvement

- Lack of clarity regarding whether meaningful co-design occurred during the process.
- Insufficient clarity regarding
 - resource allocation
 - coordination of the community of practice (CoP)
 - experience and expertise of the teams responsible for coordinating the three Areas of Work (AoW).
- Additional details required on the approaches to achieve meaningful impact.



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Yuca Invitro



CEC XX 3

CIAT
Yuca Invitro

Asset

Strengths

- CA highlights strengths and unique contributions to biodiversity conservation and agricultural innovation
- Methods and innovation in Section 6. Forward thinking use of technology such as AI-enabled tracking of accessions
- Access benefit sharing and germplasm health in AoW3. Promote equitable exchanges of genetic material and ensure local communities benefit from their contributions

Areas of improvement

- Codesign and partnerships—lacks clarity on roles and responsibilities of key partners
- MELIA very weak: Must include learning questions and establish baseline information
- Impact and focus weak. Must move from a target number approach towards increasing user numbers and from counting seed requests to documenting activities around collection and conservation

Thank you



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and Evaluation Service

Portfolio Review Sections

- Section 1 explains the purpose and how to use the document.
- Section 2 describes the review process & the QoR4D criteria used to assess proposals.
- Section 3 identifies high-level themes
- Section 4 provides a summary of the review per proposal,
- Section 5 contains detailed reviews by proposal, including quantitative & qualitative assessments
- An Annex is provided with summary analyses of the quantitative proposal assessments.

Methods

- Use of 39 external subject matter experts
 - 6-week process
 - Section 5 detailed reports
- Consensus-building during a three-day in-person meeting of the current Council members
- Assessments are rooted in the *Quality of Research for Development in the CGIAR Context*.
 - Elements: **relevance, scientific credibility, legitimacy, & effectiveness.**
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Process & Subject Matter Expert Demographics

