



CGIAR

INDEPENDENT ADVISORY  
AND EVALUATION SERVICE  
EVALUATION FUNCTION

# Strengthening the System-Wide Architecture for Data Quality Assurance to Support Evaluability: Synthesis Note

May 2026



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## Acronyms

In 1971, when it was founded, CGIAR stood for "Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research". Today, CGIAR is a global research partnership for a food-secure future, dedicated to transforming food, land, and water systems in a climate crisis, operating as a global network of 13 research centers, often referred to as the CGIAR Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers.

API	Application Programming Interface
C&E	Culture & Engagement
DQA	Data Quality Assurance
DQAF	Data Quality Assessment Framework
EA	Evaluability Assessment
GDI	Gender, Diversity and Inclusion
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MELIA	Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Impact Assessment
PRMS	Performance Results Management System
QA	Quality Assurance
ROI	Return on Investment
VfM	Value for Money

# Executive Summary

As CGIAR proceeds with the [CGIAR 2025–30 Research Portfolio](#), the credibility of its impact narrative depends on the integrity of its evidence base. CGIAR applies robust standards to its scientific data. Its enterprise evidence architecture, used to track performance, resources, and capacity, needs a further boost to proceed apace with operational integration.

This Synthetic Note brings together findings from targeted diagnostics of the Performance Results Management System (PRMS) [Study](#) (2023), Culture & Engagement (C&E) systems ([C&E Review, 2025](#)), as well as the 2025 [Summary of Learnings on MELIA in CGIAR](#) and the 2026 Evaluability Assessment (EA) Synthesis, to identify systemic risks affecting efficiency, evaluability, and Value for Money (VfM).<sup>1</sup> The Synthesis acknowledges that the period of 2022-25 was an era of continuous improvement in CGIAR data systems and CGIAR organizational evolution. Findings in these past evaluative activities may therefore have been addressed or otherwise evolved.

**Core findings:** Current data-related governance and operating arrangements (as of February 2026) constrain capabilities growth. Fragmented systems and lack of indicator alignment limit CGIAR's ability to advance from compliance to evidence-informed, systematic learning.

Technical teams demonstrated proof-of-concept approaches such as enhanced dashboards and Common Data Languages. These solutions often operate alongside—rather than within—the current system architecture and rely on manual workarounds to limit efficiency. The persistence of cancelled or partially-addressed recommendations in the [Management Response Tracker](#) demonstrates that technical solutions alone cannot resolve deep-seated institutional and governance constraints. These findings are consistent with the 2025 EA Synthesis across 13 Programs and Accelerators in the [CGIAR's 2025-30 Research Portfolio](#), which concludes that "evaluability is constrained less by technical gaps and more by the underlying operating logic and culture...".

This Note flags four **suggested priority objectives** for CGIAR to continue advancing toward systematic, scalable approaches to data quality:

**Operational governance:** The need for clearer data stewardship, decision rights, and accountability mechanisms to enable effective data sharing and support the alignment of system-wide digital mandates with Monitoring, Evaluation, Learning and Impact Assessment (MELIA) ambitions.

1. **Semantic harmonization:** The opportunity to scale existing successes (such as the C&E Common Data Language) into automated and widely adopted data ontologies to reduce fragmentation across systems.
2. **Provenance and assurance:** The imperative to mitigate evaluability risks associated with a 'mixed economy' of data, where data of verifiable quality is not clearly distinguished from self-reporting or legacy sources.
3. **Return on investment (ROI) and utility:** The necessity of bridging the gap between supply-push designs and user needs, to ensure the timely use of data for adaptive management rather than for retrospective archiving.

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<sup>1</sup> In the CGIAR Portfolio concerning data quality, VfM refers to the strategic optimization of resources to ensure that data systems and their operational processes are cost-effective; this includes minimizing effort duplication and administrative friction while directly enabling adaptive management and evidence-based learning.

# 1 Introduction: Uneven Maturity and Bottlenecks in Evidence Systems

This Note synthesizes the key data quality challenges that CGIAR currently faces. This Note is aligned with the mandate of the Evaluation Function of [CGIAR's Independent Advisory and Evaluation Service \(IAES\)](#) to ensure the effective use of available monitoring data and coordinate with the unit responsible for monitoring implementation of actions following independent evaluations. CGIAR's credibility and capacity to deliver its mission and the [CGIAR 2030 Research and Innovation Strategy](#) depend on the reliability of reported data.

In recent years, CGIAR made significant strides in modernizing how data is presented, moving from static reports to more dynamic and visually rich dashboards. These developments reflect a clear institutional commitment to greater transparency and more evidence-informed management. CGIAR has a unique opportunity to modernize its evidence pipeline by establishing formal representation as the foundational logic for semantic interoperability, which is essential to unlock AI-powered predictive insights. This foundation also provides the 'ground truth' essential to harnessing generative AI for real-time, automated analysis and validation of complex narrative evidence.

**Problem:** Evaluations indicate that while data presentation has advanced, the underlying data pipeline remains fragile and fragmented. This contributes to a persistent reporting paradox where sophisticated visualizations are not yet well connected to strategic learning, resulting in a theory-rich but evidence-thin landscape. While the System applies rigorous protocols to scientific data, the architecture supporting enterprise evidence—including performance metrics, human resources, and budget execution—remains relatively less developed.

**Impact:** The uneven maturity between scientific and enterprise evidence creates a credibility gap: stakeholders who trust CGIAR's science may question Portfolio efficiency where administrative evidence is inconsistent. This assurance ceiling forces evaluators to devote disproportionate effort to forensic verification rather than strategic analysis, as fragmented data streams require significant investment in data reconciliation. Ultimately, evaluation readiness is often assumed, rather than intentionally designed, leading to higher costs and fewer opportunities for strategic learning and adaptive management.

**Root cause:** Drawing on the [Data Quality Assessment Framework \(DQAF\)](#) established by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2012, technical data quality is understood to depend on a set of 'prerequisites of quality', including a clearly defined and robust legal and institutional environment. Within CGIAR, the principal bottleneck appears to be institutional rather than technical, specifically regarding unresolved governance frameworks for data sovereignty and stewardship. Weak governance and unclear accountability—rather than data availability—are the primary drivers of evaluability constraints, often leading to a reliance on interim and manual workarounds. Notably, governance arrangements continue to evolve and remain central to strengthening data quality across the System, with the plan to establish in 2026 a Performance and Results Management Steering Group.

## 1.1 Purpose of this Note

This Synthetic Note clarifies the gap between CGIAR's strategic intent for System-wide evaluability and the current maturity of its data systems and evidence architecture. By examining these patterns, this Note proposes **four strategic priorities** (Section 3) to transform the evidence base from a retrospective compliance archive into a governing logic that prioritizes data provenance, learning, and clear Value for Money (VfM).

## 1.2 Evidentiary Foundation: Summary of Evaluative Activities

The diagnostic overview in this Note is derived from four evaluative activities:

1. **Quality Assurance (QA) Sub-Study of the Performance and Results Management System (PRMS) Project Management Approaches and Information Products' Fit for Purpose (2023).** This was part of a [broader study of PRMS](#) implementation and its products. As a formative case study, it examines the PRMS's QA mechanisms, focusing on verifying reported outputs and evaluating the effectiveness of the Results Dashboard. The study identifies risks in the results verification process and highlighted the need for robust outlier detection to ensure the integrity of reported metrics. The Management Response actions *vis-à-vis* the study were recently flagged as closed.
2. **The Gender, Diversity and Inclusion (GDI) C&E Data Ecosystem of CGIAR: A Data Quality Assurance (DQA) Case Study (2025).** Part of the System-wide GDI/Culture and Engagement (C&E) review, the study finds a fragmented architecture reliant on manual 'translation' of center-held data into System-wide templates. The study highlights how the lack of a centralized 'People Database' and hampered system-wide data governance force a dependence on unscalable and unsustainable workarounds.
3. **Summary of Learnings on MELIA in CGIAR (2025):** This [learning product](#) integrated findings from evaluations of the 2022–24 Portfolio to inform the design of the 2025–30 Research and Innovation Portfolio. This summary advocates for a transition toward user-centric, streamlined reporting systems that prioritize adaptive management and evidence-based learning over mere compliance.
4. **Evaluability Assessment Synthesis (2026):** This synthesis of 13 Programs and Accelerators identifies seven System-level themes, diagnosing a theory-rich but evidence-thin Portfolio landscape. While conceptual designs are strong and MELIA institutionalization improved, recurring themes highlight a lack of operational detail—particularly regarding behavioral change tracking and long-term outcome continuity. The synthesis concludes that the primary barrier to evaluability is not technical, but an institutional operating logic that treats evaluation as a retrospective archive rather than a governing principle for learning and VfM.

### 1.3 Scope and Limitations

As emphasized in the EA Synthesis, surface-level observations reflect broader system dynamics, wherein ambitious theories and reporting structures are not yet fully supported by the underlying evidence systems. The examples cited in this Synthetic Note from the above evaluative activities are illustrative rather than exhaustive, to highlight recurring issues. Examples are not intended as critiques of individual teams, but rather as visible indicators of structural constraints within CGIAR's data environment.

## 2 Assessment: Emerging Capabilities and Structural Constraints

This Note underscores the importance of strengthening and operationalizing existing quality frameworks, including the [CGIAR QA Process for Technical Reporting](#) and the [Guidance on QA of W3/Bilateral Results for 2025 Technical Reporting](#), to ensure that data quality, consistency, and evaluability are governed as core system properties rather than addressed on an *ad hoc* basis. The reviewed case studies suggest that CGIAR's data teams frequently achieve results, despite existing system constraints. The following sections examine the gap between institutional intent and operational reality through four analytical dimensions as areas of strategic necessity:

### 2.1 The Operational Governance Constraint: Strategy vs. Stewardship

- **Emerging capability:** CGIAR 360 Strategy documents articulate the intended target: a data-mesh-oriented architecture in which CGIAR centers and Programs and Accelerators (per CGIAR's current Portfolio) act as domain owners for their respective operational and scientific spheres, while the System Organization plays an aggregation role. The vision is technically sound and aligns with global best practices for federated

organizations. The strategic intent to move toward a more application programming interface (API)-driven ecosystem<sup>2</sup> is clearly signaled.

- **Structural constraint:** Despite clarity of the strategic direction, the governance machinery required for execution faces systemic frictions.
  - **Sovereignty traps:** While centers are technically capable of sharing data through APIs, they remain cautious in the absence of a clearly defined framework for permissible data use. Centers fear that users may access data shared for one purpose (e.g., a directory) and then reuse it for another purpose (e.g., talent poaching) without consent. This means that concerns relate less to technical feasibility than to how shared data may be reused beyond its original purpose without appropriate safeguards, and it points to a governance challenge of trust rather than capacity. These concerns are consistent with findings from the EA Synthesis and PRMS follow-up study, highlighting how unclear roles, responsibilities, and decision rights constrain System-wide evaluability.
  - **Stewardship void:** Beyond gaps in data sharing policy, decision rights related to data quality are not yet clearly defined. In practice, there is limited clarity on who has the authority to resolve data quality issues between a center and a global program, or between a center and the System Organization's responsible unit. This lack of role definition can diffuse accountability, making quality a shared concern without clear ownership.
  - **Implementation lag:** As illustrated in the C&E case, delays in approving and implementing data initiatives can create bottlenecks. In some instances, CGIAR has limited mechanisms to enable timely decisions on user-centric reforms, resulting in data products progressing slowly from design to implementation.

## 2.2 The Semantic Harmonization Constraint: Local Success vs. System Scale

- **Emerging capability:** The C&E function's development of a Common Data Language is a positive example, proving that harmonizing diverse center-level definitions into a unified system-level view is feasible, even within a federated environment. In mapping different center job grades to a standard system reference, the exercise demonstrated that semantic interoperability can be achieved in practice.
- **Structural constraints:** Currently, this harmonization remains fragile as it operates across largely disconnected systems. While some automation is in place, it does not consistently preserve the underlying meaning of the data as it moves between systems. As noted in the 2025 MELIA Summary, this creates a gap in which high volumes of reporting do not necessarily translate into information that supports strategic learning. The EA Synthesis further highlights Portfolio-wide fragmentation across MELIA systems, characterized by uneven maturity levels, partially developed but insufficiently integrated architectures, and variable readiness for evaluation across planning documentation.
  - **Conceptual inconsistency:** While local data dictionaries exist within functions such as C&E, they are not currently interoperable at CGIAR System level. In the absence of a System-mandated data ontology to automate Common Data Language mapping, the CGIAR System is at risk of parallel or inconsistent interpretations of data. This challenge is compounded by indicator proliferation. Evidence from the 2025 MELIA Summary suggests that, without consistent adherence to a machine-readable ontology, metrics lack sufficient specificity and structure to support comparable reporting. As a result, internally coherent but inconsistent reporting can persist across platforms. The C&E case provides an illustrative example in which public and internal dashboards report materially different figures for core metrics, such as headcount (ranging from 8,790 to 10,528 staff). Findings from the EA Synthesis further suggest that when

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<sup>2</sup> An API is a structured, machine-readable interface that enables different digital systems within the CGIAR ecosystem (e.g., center systems, global program platforms, and system-level tools) to securely exchange data in an automated and standardized way, without requiring manual data transfer or duplication.

theories of change remain broad or insufficiently specified, links between intervention logic, MELIA frameworks, and evidence needs are weakened. This limits evaluability and reduces the ability to assess credible contribution across the Portfolio.

- **Aggregation challenge:** The [PRMS study](#) that some commonly used indicators, such as ‘people trained’ were applied to a wide range of activities, including both intensive technical workshops and large-scale outreach events. This occurred despite the existence of Standard Indicator Description Sheets, confirming that while definitions existed, they lacked sufficient taxonomic precision to support consistent aggregation. As outlined by Thomas Gruber (1993), interoperability requires a formal ontology—a structured specification of concepts and their relationships—rather than a set of high-level definitions alone. Semantic interoperability serves as a critical gateway for transforming fragmented data into machine-ready evidence capable of driving predictive analytics and advanced machine learning. Moving beyond administrative consistency toward formal representation is a strategic necessity for 2030 and beyond.
- The MELIA Summary similarly notes that these constraints are linked to indicators that are weakly aligned with the theory of change and that prioritize supply-oriented outputs over clearly measurable impact pathways. The follow-up to the PRMS Study suggests that, while progress was made in clarifying definitions and control lists, further work is needed to embed these improvements into System-wide, automated semantic frameworks to ensure consistency at scale.

## 2.3 The Provenance and Assurance Constraint: Modernization vs. Verification

- **Emerging capability:** The modernization of the Results Dashboard represents a clear improvement in transparency and accessibility. The System is shifting from static, PDF-based reporting toward more interactive data exploration, improving stakeholder access to information on Portfolio performance.
- **Structural constraints:** The current evidence ecosystem does not yet provide a fully articulated chain of custody across data sources and uses.
  - **Assurance ceiling:** Verification approaches tend to focus on administrative checks, such as completeness and formatting, rather than on more in-depth validation of data integrity. In the PRMS context, quality control processes were primarily compliance-oriented. The 2025 MELIA Summary confirms that such approaches can create a perception of assurance through adherence to reporting standards, while leaving underlying evaluability risks inadequately addressed.
  - **Verification firewall:** Data governance arrangements can hamper independent verification. As observed in the C&E case study, the review team was not always able to fully audit aggregated dashboard data. In some instances, raw data shared for review was partially redacted for data protection reasons, limiting the ability to verify key figures at both the source and aggregate levels.
  - **Provenance paradox:** Evidence is currently drawn from a mix of sources with differing levels of validation, assured datasets, legacy feeds (genebanks), and self-reported activity data. When these sources are presented together without clear differentiation, users cannot distinguish quality levels. The MELIA Summary and EA Synthesis note that this lack of transparency increases the verification burden on evaluators, raises assurance costs, and limits the reusability of data for learning and accountability purposes (FAIR<sup>3</sup> principle of Reusability).

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<sup>3</sup> Findable, Accessible, Interoperable and Reusable (FAIR)-See Wilkinson, M. D., et al. (2016). The FAIR Guiding Principles for scientific data management and stewardship. *Scientific Data*, 3, 16,018.

## 2.4 ROI and Utility Constraint: Intent vs. Execution

- **Emerging capability:** Both the C&E and Portfolio Performance teams demonstrate a clear intent to move toward more user-centered approaches, recognizing that traditional supply-driven models lead to low uptake. The co-development of indicators with centers (C&E) and the adoption of more agile product development practices (PRMS) reflect this strategic direction.
- **Structural constraints:** Translating this intent into practice has proven challenging and, at times, introduced VfM risks. As noted in the MELIA Summary, results dashboards are often perceived as retrospective reporting tools, rather than as tools to support adaptive management.
  - **Co-development tension:** The C&E approach prioritized high utility through co-development. While the approach was conceptually sound, the complexity of consultation and consensus-building in a federated system contributed to extended timelines. In practice, this created periods where timely, consolidated data was not readily available.
  - **Implementation volatility:** Conversely, the PRMS process aimed for speed of delivery. However, evolving operational needs led to mid-cycle adjustments to System structures. This volatility created systemic instability and made it more difficult for stakeholders to maintain a shared understanding of the scope of QA processes.
  - **Implications for efficiency:** Taken together, the CGIAR System incurs a double penalty. First, the high investment in digital tools does not consistently translate into sustained use where tools are shaped more by available data than by clearly defined user needs. This reinforces the utility gap identified in the MELIA 2025 Summary. At the same time, the lack of automated semantic interoperability requires skilled staff to manually reconcile data, diverting capacity from analytical and scientific work to administrative tasks. PRMS follow-up assessments suggest that greater clarity around user archetypes and priority use cases, areas already recognized in earlier recommendations, would further strengthen data utility and improve ROI.

## 3 Strategic Priorities

The transition from a reporting culture to an evidence culture requires targeted adjustments to resolve systemic bottlenecks identified in Section 2. To reinforce the integrity of the CGIAR System's evidence base, CGIAR should align its system-wide architecture with international standards, such as [IMF's DQAF](#) and [USAID ADS 201](#), and is recommended to address the four strategic priority areas as follows:

### 3.1 Institutionalizing Data Governance

**Objective:** Address authorization barriers to enable the effective implementation of the Data Mesh architecture (Example: Recommendation 10 of the C&E Review).

- **Suggested Action:** Move beyond high-level data-sharing policy and establish an operational governance framework that clearly defines:
  - **Decision rights:** Establish who has the authority to enforce a binding definition.
  - **Permissible use:** Establish a multilateral 'terms of service' agreement between the operational entities (centers, research programs, and Accelerators) and the System Organization. This should recognize that the operational entities are not only producers of data but also consumers, ensuring that data shared for system visibility provides reciprocal value (such as benchmarking), back to the source.
  - **Stewardship:** Assign specific Data Stewards for core domains (HR, Finance, Program) with clear accountability for quality.

- **The place of Generative AI:** Establishing clear decision rights and accountability protocols creates the necessary institutional environment for integrating Generative AI into the QA workflow as a force-multiplier for real-time semantic analysis and validation of complex evidence.

## 3.2 Enforcing Semantic Harmonization

**Objective:** Address systemic fragmentation and metric conflation across the diverse portfolio of centers, global research programs, and platforms (e.g., recommendation 8 of the PRMS Study and recommendation 2 of the CGIAR Platform for Big Data in Agriculture Evaluation). Build on the C&E team’s progress with the Common Data Language.

- **Suggested Action:** Require adherence to a machine-readable CGIAR-wide ontology, moving beyond reliance on static document-based definitions.
  - **Mapping requirement:** As operational entities (centers, global research programs, and platforms) evolve or maintain their internal systems, they should sustain an automated mapping layer with System standards. This approach shifts the burden of data reconciliation from manual processes to automated mechanisms.
  - **Controlled vocabularies:** To limit semantic drift, System-level reporting interfaces should prioritize structured taxonomies over free-text inputs. For example: replacing generic ‘training’ fields with specific categories (such as ‘skill-based workshop’ instead of ‘awareness event’) would reduce the aggregation of dissimilar activities. This ensures indicator definitions are not just administratively consistent but also are aligned with the theory of change, enabling tracking of meaningful contribution pathways rather than just supply-side outputs.
  - **Tagging mechanism:** Establish a formal designation whereby data is explicitly labeled as ‘System-ready’ once it adheres to machine-readable ontologies and Common Data Languages. This labeling distinguishes local accuracy from system-wide interoperability, providing a verified bridge to automate integration of heterogeneous data sources into a System-wide evidence base. Once these tags are in place, the evidence enables a ‘machine-ready’ architecture that automatically filters and aggregates data without manual reconciliation—a prerequisite for unlocking AI-powered insights and advanced machine learning.

## 3.3 Formalizing Data Provenance

**Objective:** Improve transparency on assurance levels for all stakeholders—including management, donors, and evaluators—so that evaluability challenges can be addressed without penalizing diverse data-sourcing models (e.g., recommendation 6 of the PRMS Study).

- **Suggested Action:** Implement a tiered quality-badging system across dashboards and data presentations to explicitly distinguish differences in evidence maturity. This approach would move dashboards and data visualizations from uniform visual presentations toward evidence-weighted views, enabling users to distinguish between data that are indicative, ‘directional’ data (Tier 1) and data that are suitable for decision making, ‘decision-ready’ data (Tier 3):
  - **Tier 1-Self-Reported:** Narrative activity logs or legacy data feeds submitted by centers, programs, or platforms; subject to checks for completeness only. *Classification: Limited assurance (user caution advised).*
  - **Tier 2-Administratively assured:** Data cleared by a specified QA process, e.g., checks that mandatory fields are complete, templates are followed, and evidence links (DOIs, URLs, or citations) are present and active. *Classification: Administratively assured.*
  - **Tier 3-Verified:** Data subjected to sample-based verification against authoritative sources (ERPs or primary documentation). *Classification: Audited.*

### 3.4 Designing for Value (ROI)

**Objective:** Address legacy ‘one-size-fits-none’ approaches by closing utility gaps between system development, data collection, and data use (e.g., recommendation 6 of the C&E Review and recommendation 5 of the PRMS Study).

- **Suggested Action:** Reframe oversight from an emphasis on ‘quality at entry’ toward ‘quality for purpose’. This ensures that data assets support ongoing learning and adaptive management rather than functioning solely as retrospective records.
  - **User definition:** Entities developing System-level data assets should explicitly define core user archetypes (e.g., donors, evaluators, operational leads, and implementing partners), replacing generic or undifferentiated stakeholder categories.
  - **Utility gate:** Investment in dashboard and data infrastructure should be contingent on a demonstrated ability to meet the defined information needs or ‘jobs to be done’ of these user groups. This approach helps ensure that resources are directed toward data assets that deliver clear value for governance, oversight, and operations, and reduces the accumulation of underutilized or low-utility systems.

## 4 Conclusion

This Synthetic Note indicates that CGIAR’s data-related challenges are largely organizational, with governance arrangements limiting the effective use of emerging digital capabilities. Where data sovereignty issues remain unresolved and semantic mapping relies on manual processes, the System incurs avoidable inefficiencies. These include continued reliance on skilled staff for time-intensive administrative reconciliation rather than higher-value analytical and learning functions.

These conditions continue to constrain evaluability. The resources required for data verification absorb a substantial share of evaluation effort, limiting the budget available for strategic learning and impact analysis. As emphasized in the EA Synthesis, this reflects a broader system pattern in which evaluability is often treated as an assumed condition rather than a governing principle embedded across design, evidence, learning, and financial arrangements.

Securing the 2025–30 Portfolio will require a shift in how DQA is approached—from a primary focus on tool development toward stronger governance of trust, clearer semantic standards, and greater transparency regarding evidence quality. In line with the EA Synthesis, strengthening data quality should be understood not as a technical upgrade but as an institutional reform that positions evaluability as a System capability linking scientific quality, learning, and performance management. By systematizing data governance, CGIAR can bridge the gap between digital ambition and operational practice. This shift will ensure that the System’s enterprise evidence aligns with its world-class standards for quality of science and better supports adaptive management for global impact.

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