



Consortium's response to FTA's external review, November 2014

The external review team has produced a final report rich in recommendations and constructive suggestions for FTA, with many implications for other CRPs, as well as for the CB/CO and the FC. The Consortium commends the review panel for the quality of the report, the insights it provides into FTA's research program and functioning and its systematic approach, which ensures that the differing perspectives of key actors (e.g., of scientists, boundary partners, lead centre ...) are thoroughly analysed.

The review panel makes 12 recommendations. The Consortium is in agreement with all of them, as is the senior management of FTA. The response from FTA management is thorough and convincing in its explanations of the steps that FTA and the lead centre will take to address these recommendations.

The objective of this document is to particularly respond to those recommendations that have a bearing not only on FTA's situation but also on other CRPs, as well as to the recommendations directly aimed at the CB/CO. The external review team has indeed identified a number of actions which need to be taken at system level to further improve the overall effectiveness of the CRPs and remove some of the current obstacles to their successful functioning.

1. Recommendations relevant uniquely to FTA

Overall, the review panel considers that FTA is an important program globally and within the CGIAR system. In their assessment, FTA is well managed, produces good and relevant research outputs, is a coherent program and has a lead centre that is open and flexible and takes into consideration the overall interests of the FTA partnership. The review occurred at a time, very early in the life cycle of the CRP, when development outcomes were the products of research predating the creation of the CRP.

Among the 12 recommendations, recommendations 1, 2, 5, 6 and 9 are specifically relevant to FTA. The first 2 recommendations concern FTA's research components, their coverage and overall balance. The panel considers that these have a high global relevance, and identifies ways of further strengthening FTA's agenda within its research components. The Consortium fully agrees, and so does FTA's management.

Recommendation 5 concerns the 'sentinel landscapes' devised by FTA as long-term research sites and the need to rationalise work at these sites, with clearer objectives and expected results, including clearer integration of these results with the rest of FTA's research agenda, and a clear business case, given the high cost of such field work, currently funded mainly through W1-2. The proposal that is prepared for the second call will address this point.

Recommendation 6 focuses on FTA's gender strategy and on the need to update it to capture earlier lessons learned and clarify scalability of results. The panel also recommends that FTA's Steering



Committee monitor the mainstreaming of gender sensitive research. Again, the Consortium agrees with this recommendation and fully supports the response from FTA's management.

Recommendation 9 stems from the panel's observation that FTA keeps track of the outputs it produces but not so much of the outcomes generated by its work, and that there is a non-alignment between the financial information and the project data it manages. For instance, close to 100 projects were accounted, at least partially in terms of expenditures, but were not found by the review panel in the project database. Coding quality issues were identified, as well as a non systematic recording of the countries where data are collected. An overhaul of FTA's data management system is recommended, and agreed to by FTA management.

2. Recommendations relevant to FTA and other CRPs

Five of the recommendations from the panel are relevant not only to FTA but also to the other CRPs. In addition to FTA's own response, the Consortium proposes to address these recommendations through amendments in the guidance for the second call and appropriate joint actions with the centres.

Recommendation 3 emphasises that it is not a comparative advantage of the CGIAR/FTA to undertake development work per se -there are many partners better placed than the CGIAR to do this. The need for a CRP to demonstrate that it contributes to development outcomes must not be interpreted as the need to build in-house capacities in development work, as appears to be the case in some of the participating centres. The report shows that boundary partners consider that the case-study approach to scaling up that is used by FTA does not lead to concrete and systematic lessons and conclusions about the most effective ways of scaling up FTA's research results in varying environments. The Consortium fully agrees with this analysis, which has relevance for other CRPs as well. A CRP is expected to engage with development partners, as development work must remain the domain of specialist institutions in development. A systematic research approach to scaling up is however needed to enable CRPs to move beyond case-studies and trial and error approaches that constitute the main approach to scaling up innovations throughout the portfolio of 15 CRPs that. This will require CRPs to identify the key processes at play in different biophysical and socio-economic environments for effective scaling up to occur beyond case-studies areas. The guidance for the second call will be amended to better reflect this point.

Recommendation 4 concerns FTA's theory of change and impact pathways and has a number of important implications. The panel notes that FTA developed its theory of change by starting with sets of research activities and aggregating expected results of these activities upwards, including retrofitting bilateral projects into FTA's objectives and development outcomes. They point out that a viable theory of change starts from expected development outcomes, and works backwards to identify appropriate research activities that will lead to achieving these outcomes – the reverse of what FTA did. This is an issue common to a number of CRPs; it reflects the manner in which CRPs were built, based upon on-going research projects at the time of the reform. The external review panel recommends that this issue be addressed in the proposal FTA is preparing in response to the second call. The Consortium will emphasise in its guidance for the second call the need to design theories of change and impact pathways based upon expected outcomes, rather than on-going activities.



In its supporting analysis the panel also notes that FTA is an aggregation of projects (as all CRPs are) that are generally relevant to its objectives but are not yet coalescing into a fully coherent whole. One of their suggestions is that the two main partner centres, CIFOR and ICRAF, need to work in a more collaborative and integrated manner than they have done. This is an insightful comment that the CO will capture in the next version of the guidance for the second call, as it applies more broadly to a number of CRPs.

Other analyses supporting recommendation 4 emphasise that it has been almost impossible for the leadership of FTA to engage in proactive research portfolio management of the numerous bilateral projects allocated to FTA because the grants for these projects are obtained by the partner centres in the CRP, and as such are based upon the centres' own priorities. The panel notes that one way of addressing this issue in a sustainable manner is for the centre partners in the CRP to design their own institutional strategy so that it is aligned with the objectives of FTA. Currently, the opposite has occurred, based on the agreement reached during the reform that on-going research projects would not be discontinued but integrated into the new CRPs. Such alignment would result in bilateral grants being designed to contribute to FTA/a CRP and would resolve the 'tension' noted by the panel between the use of bilateral funds and the use of W1-2 funds by the CRP. The Consortium has observed that some centres have already re-designed their own strategy (e.g., IITA) so that there is a full alignment between the centre strategy and the strategy of the CRPs to which the centre contributes. The CB and CO will work with centres to jointly identify an optimal way forward to ensure that proactive research portfolio management for bilateral projects becomes the norm for all CRPs.

Recommendation 7 is based upon the conclusion by the panel that boundary partners of FTA are not sufficiently aware of FTA's roles and activities, which is not a sustainable situation considering the need for FTA's results to be scaled up, including through such partners, for outcomes to ensue. The Consortium notes that this is very likely the case for a number of other CRPs. The panel recommends that boundary partners as well as donors (Fund donors and bilateral donors) be better included in priority-setting and implementation of the CRP through an action plan aimed at (i) raising the awareness of boundary partners, (ii) better understanding the concrete needs of strategic partners and boundary partners and (iii) better communicating with its key donors about the synergies the CRP creates through closer integration of bilaterally funded projects with W1-2 funded work. The Consortium fully supports the concept of such an action plan and will integrate it in the second call for proposals.

Recommendation 10 concerns the mandate of FTA's Steering Committee. The panel observed that this Committee has not established strategic research priorities nor has it addressed resource allocation from the perspective of these priorities. In order for this Committee to do so without conflicts of interest, the panel recommends broadening membership of the Committee to include independent professionals and strengthening the mandate of the Committee to include strategic priority setting. The panel also notes that the CB/CO fulfils governance functions that are complementary to those of the BOT of the lead centre but are not sufficiently clarified and understood, and recommends that a CO Representative be a member of the Steering Committee to increase communication and alignment between the CO and the CRP. The Consortium is aware that other CRPs have a Steering Committee with

similarly limited mandate and it fully supports this recommendation about strengthening the mandate and independence of the Steering Committee. It also notes that representation of the CO on the Steering Committee of CRPs was initially discussed, but was not supported by the centres. Recommendation 10 requires renewed discussions between the CB and the centres on this specific point.

Recommendation 11 aims at strengthening the mandate and independence of the Director of the CRP. The panel stresses that the Director has little managerial authority compared with directors of global partnership programs. Indeed the Director has no mandate or responsibility for decision-making on project proposals and contracts, on the allocation of resources across and within components and for staff supervision and performance assessment outside of the small leadership team. This situation is representative of a number of other CRPs. The key points that the panel recommends be implemented to increase the managerial authority of the Director are fully supported by the Consortium, and will be integrated in the second call for proposals to ensure uptake by other CRPs.

3. Recommendations for the CB/CO and FC/FO

Recommendations 8 and 12 are principally aimed at the CB and FC.

The financial analyses undertaken by the review team show that overall W1-2 disbursements have consistently lagged behind budgets, both intra and inter yearly, and that there appears to be no trend towards more timely disbursements. This source of financial uncertainty is compounded by the freeze the FC implemented on disbursements to all CRPs when one centre had an investment problem and by the CO changing allocation rules to the CRPs overtime. Furthermore, the panel determined that the rate of recovery from bilateral grants in FTA is not the stipulated full overhead recovery. The panel thus recommends (recommendation 8) that the FC and the CB work closely together to ensure predictable and reliable funding from W1-2, disbursed in a timely manner, so that a CRP can plan its work on this stable basis. The panel also recommends that the FC establish a transparent approach to resolve incomplete overhead cost recovery in bilateral grants at system level. The Consortium supports this recommendation and is fully prepared to work with the FC to achieve the financial stability in W1-2 and timely disbursements that all CRPs need to function effectively.

Recommendation 12 is a synthesis recommendation, emphasising that a few years of stability (not uniquely financial) are now needed to consolidate work and successes and iron out various issues, such as those raised in the review report. Recommendation 12 also explicitly mentions the need for centres to align their institutional strategies with the strategy of the CRPs they are most invested in (point already addressed above as part of the more proactive management of research projects that a CRP must be able to undertake to be successful). It also advocates clarifications and improvements in the RBM system proposed by the Consortium. The panel notes that RBM has been advocated but is not yet fully defined by the CO/CB. Based upon various statements from the CO on RBM the panel concludes that the CO may have unrealistic expectations about RBM. The review team considers that there are unresolved issues that the CB/CO need to clarify about the use of RBM as a resource allocation mechanism. These issues are: (i) difficulties in attributing development outcomes to research activities in a credible manner, (ii) difficulties in monitoring the types of indicators that are contemplated on an on-going basis, as this will require a significant additional investment in monitoring capabilities and costs, that the system is currently not equipped to assume, (iii) absence of a reliable and credible methodology to compare the 'value for money' of very different kinds of results that are produced



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with very different budget levels by scientific approaches that are vastly different, and (iv) the considerable time lag between research activities and their development results. The panel thus recommends that the CB/CO 'urgently' ensure that a workable and realistic system for results measurement and RBM be ready for deployment for the second call. The Consortium agrees with this last recommendation and will further clarify how RBM is going to be implemented, including rules of allocation of W1-2 funds across the CRP portfolio, in time for the second call.

Finally, the Consortium notes that the TORs for this review did not include an assessment of how FTA interacts with other CRPs. This was unfortunate, as the performance of each CRP in the portfolio is also a function of how well it is connected to and works with key other CRPs. The Consortium thus proposes that IEA should include this additional responsibility (assessing the relevance and effectiveness of a CRP's collaborations with relevant CRPs) in all future external evaluations of CRPs.