

Consortium Management Response to the External Review of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE)

The Consortium welcomes the CGIAR IEA review report of the CRP Water, Land and Ecosystems (WLE) CGIAR Research Program (CRP), which makes twelve recommendations¹, eleven concerning the means to improve WLE in the future and one, Recommendation 12, directed more at the CGIAR System as a whole, about the importance of a WLE-like program to the CGIAR portfolio.

Taking into consideration the CGIAR Consortium's oversight responsibilities for CRPs under the CGIAR Consortium's Constitution, the Consortium's initial comment is focused on Recommendation 12:

Recommendation 12. The Continuing Imperative of WLE. The Evaluation Team strongly recommends that the CGIAR retain a program with WLE's focus on the interactions between ecosystems and agricultural production. It should serve as an integrative CRP at levels of organization beyond the plot or field which are the targets of many other CRPs (e.g. at the catchment, basin and regional scales) and it should take explicit account of externalities and trade-offs that can become apparent at these scales. The specific form of such a program and its relationship to other CRPs needs to be established but to not have such a program, whatever the details of its form and institutional focus, would risk the momentum that has been established by WLE in the CGIAR's long-term efforts and programs on natural resources management.

Consortium response: Agreed, as it aligns with and confirms the call for a global integrating program on water land (including soils) and ecosystems in the SRF (CGIAR 2016-2030 SRF) and the guidance for 2nd phase CRPs (December 2015). The content of such a program will be subject to review on the basis of the 2nd phase proposal of WLE (already submitted on 2 April 2016).

The Remaining 11 Recommendations of the Evaluation

The Consortium notes that the WLE Management Response similarly welcomes the evaluation report and accepts 10 of the 12 recommendations fully, accepts recommendation 4 (on publication policy) in principle; and agrees only in part with recommendation 5 (on dedicated research facilities).

The WLE Evaluation panel, under the coordination of Elias Fereras and with contributions to finalization of the report by John Soussan, have produced a clear and readable account of

¹ The recommendations section of the Executive Summary opens with the statement that there are 13 recommendations. However, numerically, there are 12 in total.

the program's strengths and weaknesses that were observed over the course of nearly a year (the evaluation started in December 2014, review visits to WLE sites lasted until September 2015 and the report was only finalized in January of 2016). This was a time when the program was submitting its extension phase for 2015-2016 and preparing the development of a full proposal for the period 2017-2022.

Essentially, recognizing the continuity and evolution of WLE from the former Challenge Program on Water and Food, the panel compliments WLE on its international research for development approach to issues of sustaining natural resources and ecosystems services at the landscape level. It finds a high quality of science and innovation at the individual scientist and project levels. It believes the adoption of the approach to work in four regional water basins provides relevant entry points and the opportunity for globally important results to be provided through disparate regional partnerships. However, like the earlier critiques of the ISPC (to the original WLE program formulation and to its extension phase proposal, in 2011 and 2014 respectively) it asks whether the central issues for such a program have been properly formulated through its ecosystem services and resilience framework (and there is a good discussion of this aspect in Chapter 3 of the report). Like the ISPC, it further asks whether the conviction of the program that filling knowledge gaps in science and partner dialogue will actually be sufficient to bring about changes in governance of resources affecting agriculture and provide environmental and human welfare benefits. Individual project successes are noted (often building, necessarily, on former work of IWMI, CPWF and partners) but to what extent is the program as a whole likely to achieve success at a transformative level? The evaluation report notes the need, therefore, to raise the amount of internal analysis and synthesis of the state of literature and program results ('knowledge') including the broader drivers of change for agriculture in a natural resource context; to raise the level of social /institutional science for such analyses to help refine entry points for research; and to improve monitoring, evaluation and impact case studies, not only for their intrinsic importance but to adequately test the hypotheses on which the program is built, and to assure that the program has a real understanding of the levers of change. The program is considered to have adopted M&E, a capacity development strategy, and to have embraced the need for impact assessment studies and an appropriately focused effort to include gender, only late in the phase 1 of the program. Some of these areas therefore are considered more as a work in progress as WLE prepares for phase 2.

The recommendations are collated by headings, but each is expanded in the report by lists of bulleted "dimensions" of each issue (as reproduced below). The Consortium believes that the dimensions of the issues need to be borne in mind and revisited as WLE moves forward (beyond proposal development and into its assumed implementation phase). It notes that simple responses, or a checklist of progress only against the short version of a recommendation, could be misleading. In many cases, the report text is richer than the recommendations, which treat aspects of the program individually. For instance, the evaluation report appears to make a much more fundamental point about the alignment of

a capacity development strategy with the accomplishment of WLE program goals than is reflected simply in the recommendation (recommendation 3) about young scientists. A more comprehensive sense of the challenges for WLE are given in Chapter 8 of the report where the panel provides an overall summary of their findings against the original questions that guided the evaluation. The Consortium considers that the program has an immediate opportunity through the full proposal process to demonstrate the practical implementation of the strategic recommendations of the Evaluation panel's report and the practical steps described in the WLE CRP management's response.

Turning to the recommendations themselves:

Recommendation 1. The conceptual underpinning of WLE. WLE should clarify and further develop the conceptual underpinning of the program, including but not limited to the Ecosystem Services and Resilience Framework ('ESRF'). The ESRF should be seen as a 'living' document to be examined and continuously developed by the program. Specific actions should include the following: • Define testable hypotheses for the overall approach and develop a structured program of research and knowledge aggregation activities to examine these hypotheses. • Broaden the scope of the ESRF to include a more complete coverage of institutional, social, economic and livelihoods issues and the analysis of transformative change. • Establish a closer relationship with the PIM CRP which has the mandate and expertise to address a number of the concerns over the scope and focus of the WLE approach, including in relation to institutional and policy analysis. • Recognize and integrate a wide range of research traditions and methods and avoid prescriptive use of the ESRF in all activities and at all institutional levels. • Develop the framework as a flexible set of concepts and principles that can be adapted to the specific context and key issues of different focal regions and flagships/clusters.

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 2. WLE's Theory of Change. WLE's theory of change needs to be strengthened. It should relate directly to the analysis of change and clearly set out a usable and adaptable approach to examine change processes at all levels. This should be done in parallel with the actions described in Recommendation 1, reflecting the close association between the program's conceptual approach and the theory of change. • Undertake an analysis of what the program is seeking to change • Undertake an analysis of the drivers of and barriers to change in agricultural systems at all scales and institutional levels • Develop a structured approach to the analysis of social and institutional aspects of the change processes. This should build on and expand the work on behavioral economics currently found in the DAI core theme. • Give explicit consideration to potential externalities at all spatial and temporal scales and along relevant value chains.

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 3. Nurturing young scientists. WLE should assign sufficient resources to maintain the positive feature of having a significant number of junior scientists as project leaders. Specific actions should include the following: • Encourage collaboration between young and senior scientists • Encourage mentoring of young by senior scientists to generate good publications and visibility.

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 4. WLE publication policy. WLE participating Centers should commit to fully following WLE publication policy. Specific actions should include the following: • All publications should be internally peer-reviewed • No WLE publications should appear in predatory journals

The WLE Management response accepts the recommendation in principle, noting that there are already peer review processes and contractual arrangements in place with partners governing publication procedures.

Consortium response: The Consortium finds this a reasonable response.

Recommendation 5. Dedicated research facilities. There is need, opportunity and capability for long-term research at dedicated field facilities strategically located in developing countries. WLE should play a role in maintaining and establishing such long-term research facilities because well-managed and well-instrumented field and catchment scale laboratories are needed to underpin the research of WLE and other CRPs. Such studies are also essential to provide much needed empirical data for calibrating and validating the extensive WLE's modelling efforts. Specific actions that are needed include: • Develop strategic collaboration with institutes that have field and catchment scale laboratories or are willing to invest in them. • Undertake multi-scalar research at spatial scales that range from the field to the river basin.

The WLE Management response accepts the recommendation only in part, noting that field laboratories could contribute to part of the research that an NRM program needs to do (c.f. the more obvious requirement for AFS-type programs) but that such facilities/field sites could only be considered for the longer term with additional funding. The program however undertakes to review whether partner institutes (AFS programs or water basin associations, for instance), may be able to provide such facilities or inputs in the future.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 6. Learning, knowledge synthesis and aggregation. WLE should make a focused effort to learn from its experience in different types of projects and within and across focal regions. Specific actions should include the following: • Develop a strategy for

knowledge synthesis and aggregation across the program. • Allocate sufficient resources, and leadership from among the strongest researchers in WLE. To facilitate this process, WLE should establish a strategic group working directly under the Program Director to be responsible both for the development of the overall program strategy and the identification and management of key syntheses products. • Provide resources to flagship leaders to instigate and facilitate discussions on key themes in project clusters, with support from lead researchers in the field (both inside and outside WLE), to identify generic conclusions and areas where results are specific to the context of individual projects. • Where this has not happened, undertake global reviews of the 'state of the art' for the key themes.

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 7. Impact Assessment. The Evaluation Team recommends that WLE should make strategic investment in impact assessment taking into account available resources. Specific actions should include the following: • Undertake new impact assessment studies, as previously recommended by Merrey (2015), • Define a plan of impact assessments • Include meta-syntheses that assess outcomes across projects to provide an understanding of the effectiveness (or otherwise) of different approaches to addressing key development themes within the program [points summarized]

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 8. Partnerships. WLE management should do a comprehensive stocktaking of existing partnerships across the program. Specific actions should include the following: • Identify where the best potential exists for consolidating partnerships at cluster and regional levels. • Initiate a dialogue with partners on actions to ensure continuity in partnerships to mitigate the impact of existing funding uncertainties over the future of the program. • Recognize that different partnerships may be needed for different ToC steps or pathways (e.g. for moving from research outputs to development outcomes).

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 9. Gender. WLE should employ a dual strategy in its gender work. Specific actions should include the following: • Examine how gender integrates into WLE's technical priorities (as is being done) but also identify a few separate gender priorities and develop research questions around them. • Provide GPI with research resources to support some cutting edge transformative work specifically on gender, aimed at understanding how gender disparities and gender relations effect agricultural innovation, productivity and sustainability. • Identify a few partners that have expertise in working with women and technology at the grassroots level.

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.

Recommendation 10. Composition and role of the WLE Steering Committee. The Steering Committee should reassess its composition. Specific actions should include the following: • Include one or more members with training in social sciences research. • Undertake a rigorous and holistic debate on the role of ESR in the sustainable intensification of production by closely engaging researchers from various disciplines, including scientists who can bring agriculturalists' perspectives.

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response

Recommendation 11. Strategic management and Program Planning and Integration. Specific actions should include the following: • Develop a prioritization mechanism to deal with budget cuts, focused on WLE's own primary objectives as a CRP. This is preferable to using a proportional formula to allocate budget cuts across flagships. • Ensure the new system is transparent and agreed upon by main players. The criteria for mapping bilateral projects into WLE should be documented and the responsibility for reviewing and approving of this mapping should be assigned to flagship leaders with the WLE director providing final approval.

The recommendation is accepted by WLE Management.

Consortium response: The Consortium agrees with the program's response.