

SCIENCE COUNCIL OF THE CGIAR

Commentary on the First External Review of the Challenge Program on Water and Food (CPWF)

20 September 2007

The Report of the 1st External Review of the CPWF was discussed at the Eighth Meeting of the SC following a presentation of the main findings and recommendations of the Report by the Panel Chair, Professor Asit Biswas, and brief responses from the CPWF Coordinator, Jonathan Woolley and the IWMI Acting Director General David Molden. The latter indicated that since the final report had only arrived recently, only a tentative response on governance and management issues could be given at this stage but that a formal response would be (and was) submitted by the Consortium Steering Committee within two weeks. The SC thanks the Panel for working against a very tight timetable within the context of a review of a CP that addresses such a complex issue such as water and food. The SC noted that this was the first external review of a CP and the process may need to be amended to account for the complexity of the review by having more than three experts or more time or both.

The report provides a mixture of recommendations, some strategic and some less so, perhaps reflecting the difficulties of reviewing such a complex program with insufficient time at the end for the team to “gel” and distil a fully integrated report. Still, the report has addressed the generic and specific terms of reference and has provided an analysis of key issues and offered a number of recommendations (22 program-related and 11 governance and management-related), that will be important to the success of the CP and which must be addressed urgently in the beginning of the 2nd phase. The CPWF CSC and Management Team basically agree with all of the program-related recommendations but are not in agreement with several key governance related recommendations. Overall, the Panel supports the continuation of the CP into a 2nd phase, as does the SC.

Program-related

The Panel acknowledged the success of the CPWF in initiating a complex, multi-institutional, and ambitious research program which has strengthened linkages between CGIAR Centers, NARES, ARIs and NGOs. In the Panel’s view, results thus far justify the establishment of the CP and, assuming the recommendations are implemented, the CPWF should be able to generate good scientific outputs in the future. Understandably, the review was unable to adequately address issues of impact after only three years of project implementation. However, the review has been able to look at the functioning and quality of the elements of the CP that are now in place and from that analysis predict a strong likelihood of measurable outcomes and achievements in the 2nd phase. While the SC shares some of the optimism of the Panel in this respect, more specific examples of significant outputs, outcomes and exciting early results thus far achieved by the program – even identification of critical research hypotheses being examined – should have been cited, which would have strengthened this assessment. This, in turn, would have provided more convincing assurances of the program’s expected impacts in the future.

The Panel has provided an assessment of the program’s strategy (p. 26-27), which is highly critical of the objectives and focus – too broad, unclear and providing little guidance. Indeed, the core recommendations of the Panel focus on the need to sharpen and re-define the vision, mission and objectives of the CP. Related to this is the need for the program to specify well-defined areas of research activity to avoid problems associated with an overly broad specification of its objectives. CPWF Management agrees with these key recommendations and acknowledges the need to specify a set of achievable objectives more clearly for the next phase. The broad scope and lack of focus in this

CP is a recurring theme in the SC commentaries of previous MTPs, and is now supported by this External Review. It is paramount that the issue of focus is addressed as it moves to its 2nd phase. This has implications first and foremost for the CP's vision and mission (and subsequent strategy), all of which needs tightening, but also calls for clear, testable research hypotheses to guide and focus the research. The SC believes that the first process of initiating competitive grants without clear hypotheses and a research agenda was a root cause of this lack of focus.

The Panel recommended a critical re-assessment of the benchmark basins concept and choice of basins with a view to achieving greater focus. Management agrees to review the basin approach in phase 2, but noted that the concept has been useful to the program and clarified that the CP does not work on the entire basin in every project but the approach has helped to consider water availability issues both upstream and downstream. The Panel noted, however, with reference to projects within benchmark basins, that "the approach in most projects is not a holistic or integrated one in terms of how best to manage the land, water and biotic resources specifically within even the sub-basins of the nine selected basins for alleviating poverty and hunger, or for environmental conservation." This is a strong indictment. The SC urges the CPWF to consider carefully this recommendation, including consideration of the current choice and number of basins and the evolving experience of the basin focal projects. The results of this re-assessment should guide future project selection and should allow for value creation from the current project portfolio. Innovative basin analyses could tie the projects together better and identify priority areas of research which are likely to best support achievements of the CPWF objectives. Ideally, this should have been carried out at the beginning of the CP.

Thus as a condition for the continuation of the 2nd phase, the SC recommends that the CPWF develop a new strategy with a clear focus on those parts of the complex issues of the "Challenge" it intends to address in the 2nd phase and elaborate how it will do so. This new document should be discussed and approved by the SC at SC09. It is important that clear research gaps are identified on which a call for proposals and/or commissioned research is based. The anticipated research outputs should be clearly defined and *a priori* should be IPGs. This will avoid having to extract IPG-nature outputs retroactively as was the case in phase 1.

More in-depth analysis by the Panel would have been helpful to the SC on the critical question of the "added value" of the CP. The Panel recommends careful attention to this aspect in the evaluation of the 2nd phase. As stated by the Panel, during that evaluation the "added value" components should be assessed within the context of a marginal analysis approach and should be clearly linked to CPWF's efforts. It requires the *ex post* evaluation to consider results thus far achieved (against costs) with and without the CPWF. This will be a challenging exercise because many of the CPWF projects have antecedents in their "home" Centers. Hence, it will involve projecting the fate of research projects that had been running up to the time the CPWF commenced, had they not been successful in securing CPWF funding to keep going. In fact, this analysis is at the heart of validating the CP "added value" concept.

In lieu of a formal analysis, the Panel attempted to consider the added value of the CP through different means and often cast the "counterfactual" as a comparison with an individual Center, particularly IWMI. Thus, issues such as "how has the CP developed linkages to other partners and other Centers" and "how has the CP added more donors" have been addressed to some extent. In the Panel's view the strengthened linkages between CGIAR Centers, NARES, ARIs and NGOs is perhaps the most obvious and important "added value". One other measure could have been "how successful has this CP been in bringing together the water and the food sectors of research?". There is evidence within the report that this has not happened. As this was one of the major objectives of the CP – bringing together partners from different sectors to address water and agriculture related constraints holistically – it represents a major deficiency and one which merits serious attention in phase 2. In this context the SC notes that a number of Centers are now formulating their programs on a catchment or

landscape basis. This orientation may offer good scope to integrate better and to align various Center programs via the CPWF. To realise on this promise however may require that Centers be encouraged to use the same benchmark basins as has been identified by the CPWF. Perhaps using some of the CPWF funding as an incentive to encourage this integration, in lieu of competitive grants, would be worthwhile?

The Panel found that a number of projects have very strong links with their “parent” CGIAR Center and that it was difficult to determine what made them different from Center-based projects. For instance, PN 7, PN11 and PN 16 are all IRRI-based projects that have rice breeding at their cores and have well established IRRI antecedents. That is not to question these projects’ merits but rather to question the impact of CP funding as opposed to the operation of the CGIAR Centers in a “business as usual” setting. This is an important facet of project and program evaluation. One point of difference between these CP funded projects and their “parent” projects is that they involve more extension activities and a greater spread of applications across the benchmark basins to show the applicability of fundamental results. While this is no doubt a valuable contribution, it is more of an extension contribution than an IPG research contribution and needs to be assessed in that light from the CGIAR perspective.

With respect to quality and relevance of the research, the Panel felt that research methods developed by some projects did not appear to have been subjected to rigorous assessment. For instance, PN50 (Multi Scale Mekong Water Governance) gives some impression of being an advocacy project rather than an analysis project. Participatory decision making involving networks is taken *a priori* by the research team as being “good” and the project then sets about to establish this style of governance. The research process of establishing hypotheses from theory and then testing those hypotheses in the specifics of the prevailing context has not been followed. The consequential danger is that the research “findings” will be rejected by policy makers with vested interests that are counter to participatory action, because of their subjectivity.

The publications reviewed for this assessment (self-selected by the CPWF) are mostly descriptive. While for some projects this is indicative of their stage of development, even review papers can conclude with an examination of the relevance of the work thus far conducted to the overall research goals. This element is absent in many of the papers reviewed. The Panel emphasized the need to go to the next level of analysis for the program to have impact. The lack of analytical depth is consistent with concerns arising from the broad nature of the objectives set for the CPWF. The SC concurs with the Panel’s view that Theme Leaders and Basin Coordinators should give special attention to developing the necessary analytical power in its research efforts to deliver measurable impacts.

The preceding paragraphs highlight the importance of a functional internal M&E system to ensure rigor and relevance in research planning and early implementation. The M&E processes described on pp. 52-54 were clearly not adequate in this respect. Peer review, not merely in assessing individual research proposals (for awarding grants), but critical peer review of major programs of work, through such mechanisms as CP-commissioned external reviews (CP-CERs), are urgently required to evaluate the quality and relevance of science within the CP. In this respect, the SC would have liked to have seen more discussion about the objectives, research approaches, hypotheses and early results of the five major research themes of the CPWF. There are many serious criticisms identified in the Program Evaluation section of the report (pp 39-51). It is essential that mechanisms are put in place to address these satisfactorily in the 2nd phase.

The Panel also called for a more proactive documentation, especially in the preparation of synthesis reports for target audiences on specific issues resulting from the research. CPWF Management agrees with this recommendation and, related to it, the need for increasing the visibility of the program

outputs and developing a clearer publication strategy. The CPWF also recognizes the need for a stronger uptake strategy.

Independent ex-post evaluations were proposed by the Panel for all projects rather than attempting to measure ultimate development impacts at the global level, a recommendation the CPWF agrees with, as does the SC.

In sum, subject to the development of a well-conceived and more tightly focused strategy and implementation and monitoring plan for phase 2, as well as a clear exit strategy and timeline, the SC endorses continuation of the CPWF. As a next step, the SC looks forward to reviewing and endorsing a Phase 2 Plan for the CP at SC09. The Plan should focus on the deficiencies as noted in the ER report and highlighted by the SC in this commentary. As it re-defines its vision and overall objectives, sharpens its focus (including the benchmark basin concept), and establishes and implements a more rigorous internal M&E system, the SC is confident this CPWF will be able to generate highly relevant and good quality research outputs that can effectively contribute to CGIAR goals.

Governance and management - related

The Panel recommended some far-reaching reforms in the way the CPWF is governed and managed (Recommendations 24-29). For governance, this includes, among others, recruiting an independent, senior and well-respected professional to chair the CSC (without institutional ties to the CP), the establishment of an eight-member Executive Committee (with the DG of IWMI a non-voting member), and transforming the current expert panel into a Scientific Advisory Panel with the requisite level of expertise. After these initial steps, the Panel believes the CPWF could embark on a more thorough reform of its governance. For management, the Panel believes that the CPWF Management team should be strengthened to assume a more proactive role in program implementation. An iterative approach to both governance and management reforms was proposed to minimize disruption to the program.

In its formal response to the governance-related recommendations, the CSC agreed to the need to reform and improve governance and management arrangements. Although it believes the recommendations are a good starting point for discussions on reform, the CSC does not agree with the specific structure proposed by the Panel. The proposed structure raises several outstanding concerns that relate to: (i) the independence of the CPWF from the CGIAR, (ii) inadequate representation of IWMI, and (iii) the potential creation of a new "CPWF institute" that could lead to more competition rather than better collaboration across CG centres. The CSC feels that more time is required for consultation. It is currently debating what structure might be most appropriate for the CP and has outlined a process for developing a new governance structure between now and April, 2008. The CSC emphasizes that, with careful consideration and after discussion with CPWF partners, it will be able to identify a win-win solution that strengthens CPWF governance, maximises cooperation between the CPWF and CG centres and thus minimises the risk of the CPWF competing for funding with IWMI.

The SC considers this response by the CPWF a prudent one, but concurs with the Panel on the need for reform in governance and management of this CP, which, in its current form, is in contrast with the HP-CP and the SSA-CP, and thus warrants more discussion and deliberation at the System-level as well. The Council looks forward to receiving prior to its next meeting in March/April 2008 a CPWF phase 2 plan that includes a revised governance and management structure.

The Panel also made some recommendations about finance and accounting. In their view, financial management and reporting need considerable improvement and financial policies need to be strengthened in a number of areas. The SC is pleased to note the CPWF agrees with these recommendations.