

ISPC Assessment of Flagship 5 (Enhancing Sustainability across Agricultural Systems) of the CGIAR Research Program on Water, Land and Ecosystems (2017-2022)

1. Summary

WLE FP5 aims to contribute to the evolution of more sustainable and equitable agricultural landscapes at scale without compromising on productivity imperatives. In its September 2016 assessment, the ISPC rated the WLE FP 5 as “weak”. Although the ISPC recognized the ambition of the FP to become an important interface across the CGIAR for links with global partners and initiatives as a key task, it also highlighted three important caveats: i) a lack of focus and specificity, raising questions about the feasibility of delivering results; ii) an over-reliance on partners with a mixed track record on implementation and delivery; and, iii) a limited track record and experience in influencing policy in support of the promotion of sustainable intensification at scale.

The ISPC’s rating of this FP’s resubmission is moderate. The revised FP aims to address the aforementioned concerns through a rationalization of its ambitions and impact pathways, and through a clearer identification of the skill sets required across teams. The narrative has been substantially revised and many of the high-level generalities that lacked specificity of purpose and outcome have been replaced by two clearly described clusters of activity (CoAs), whose structure and sequencing provides a logical delivery framework and involves a mix of appropriate institutions and individuals to form functional teams for their implementation.

The FP is based on the concept of co-creation of knowledge and capacity development. It also provides clarity about impact pathways in complex environments where well-intended actions and policies can have unforeseen consequences at different levels of integration. In this environment, the emphasis on capacity development in decision-focused research is appropriate. The expanded focus on unintended consequences highlights the importance of the work and legitimizes the research-policy interface addressed. The use of quantitative modelling in the advancement of the FP’s science is, however, not fully clarified. There is a potential tension however, between the desire to create toolkits and analytic frameworks with wide applicability and the need to work in local contexts where institutional and technical issues may differ widely that is not fully addressed in the proposal.

2. Assessment of CRP response to the ISPC major comments on the FP

| Previous ISPC comments (14 Sep 2016) | CRP response/changes proposed | ISPC assessment |
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| 1. A lack of focus and specificity raises questions about the feasibility of delivering results. | The revised approach now centers on integrating the collective knowledge of CRPs to provide deeper insights on how to deliver more sustainable agricultural landscapes using decision analysis techniques, some of which were tested in Phase 1. These techniques are stated to provide insights into outcomes of suites of policy/program interventions, by using various probabilistic techniques that are attuned to complex (cross-scale and data scarce) | CoA 5.1 provides the technical and modelling tool kit for decision support and serves as a logical starting point for the FP. Partners such as ICRAF, IWMI, IFPRI and Bioversity appear to be appropriately engaged and integrated via a working group. Some of these working group members will also participate in CoA 5.2 thereby ensuring the right level of continuity, and also providing space for new partners to participate in order to develop solutions and generate outcomes facilitated by the tools developed in CoA 5.1. Further, phasing of these CoAs by giving early priority to CoA 5.1 in 2018 and 2019 increases |

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| | <p>contexts, and can elucidate potential trade-offs and synergies, and provide risk/return and value-of-information analyses of decision options. As such, the revised FP seeks to deliver <i>ex ante</i> and foresight information into design and monitoring. ESA aims to focus on specific landscapes where AFS CRPS are already working and has introduced a phased implementation approach.</p> | <p>the feasibility of the proposed work and provides a logical structure. There are still some concerns about how hard, quantitative, model-based analyses will inform participatory co-learning and design under CoA 5.2.</p> <p>Evidence of: a) the inclusion of appropriately skilled social scientists in both CoAs; and, b) a recognition that the process of using quantitative tools can often be more important in informing discussions, rather than the actual quantification of interactions, would have strengthened the proposal.</p> |
| <p>2. Over-reliance on partners who have a mixed track record on implementation and delivery.</p> | <p>FP5 revision states that the focus has been reoriented towards closer engagement with the AFS CRPs and their networks and those at national or subnational level responsible for decisions within the target landscapes. The partnerships in the redesigned flagship are said to have been changed to include known external partners who can further supplement any missing CGIAR skills, i.e. those with demonstrated experience at the critical policy-science interface (the expertise and comparative advantage of each of the partners is provided).</p> | <p>This has been addressed by a) providing a much better focus (see point 1 above) and by considering a mix of appropriate institutions and individuals to form functional teams (see point 3 below).</p> |
| <p>3. Limited track record and experience in influencing policy in support of the promotion of sustainable intensification at scale.</p> | <p>The FP5 revision maintains that it now builds on and learns from successful experiences (e.g. IWMI Tata Program; AgWater Solutions Project) and aims to articulate how it will deliver at a landscape level, by reassessing and incorporating lessons from Phase 1. The revised FP intends to use structured participatory processes with AFS CRPs and national partners to co-develop and co-apply decision support tools in a social learning framework. The redesign has also considered how to bring in necessary process and intermediation skills. The overall management of the redesigned FP5 has been changed to the WLE PMU (that is claimed to bring its own strengths in</p> | <p>The track record of the teams has been better articulated (2.5.1.5 & 2.5.1.7), in terms of individuals' expertise as well as in terms of clearer linkages with other CGIAR members (e.g. IFPRI's role at the science- policy interface). Policy skills are now evident within the team, as is the intended leadership of the ESA FP program leader (Appendix 2.4).</p> |

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| | science-policy dialogues), which will recruit a full-time researcher with experience of policy and practice reform processes. | |
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3. Characterization of the Flagship

| Main strengths | Weaknesses |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic relevance to the CGIAR CRP portfolio | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unclear how research outputs will make a contribution to the necessary governance changes required to achieve pervasive impact |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced focus on unintended consequences and trade-offs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Potential for FP priorities to be disproportionately influenced by bilateral/W3 funding |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective network of internal and external partners with strong local track records | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • FP's comparative advantage relative to other development partners in the area of work remains unclear. |