

14 October 2011

ISPC commentary on the Proposal for CRP 1.2: Humid tropics

Summary

The proposal CRP 1.2 seeks to address the development challenges of reducing poverty and improving ecosystem integrity in the humid and sub-humid tropics. The proposal describes challenges faced by developing regions in the humid tropics, provides examples of lessons learned from some previous research, and describes theoretical considerations for a systems approach to research and development. It proposes five strategic research themes (SRTs) which provide Situation and Priority Analysis (SRT1); Integrated System Improvement - which is composed of three SRTs, namely, 2.1 Institutional Effectiveness; 2.2 Systems Productivity; and, 2.3 on Integrity of Natural Resources. These are complemented by SRT3 designed to provide a global synthesis. Within these SRTs a substantial portfolio of activities is proposed for the initial three years targeting seven major developing country regions with varying intensity and subjects for research. The 3-year total budget request is projected at USD144 million with just under half (USD69 million) requested from CGIAR Fund windows 1 and 2.

Convincing justification for investing effort in the humid tropics is provided that is consistent with the mission of the overall CGIAR system and its SRF. The strategic direction, goal and objectives of the CRP make sense and are well aligned with SLOs. While many of these elements are considered encouraging, the proposal as a whole fails to convince because its development is unfinished and the several key components remain separate. Target regions for the research (action areas) are not very well characterized and initial choices are assumed to mostly reflect current research activities. Three action areas, one in each of the sub-regions are proposed but, at the admission of the proponents, these areas remain vast and the actual locations where research is to be conducted, or R4D platforms, are yet to be defined. The focus on Africa is appropriate but may be oversubscribed in this initial proposal. The ISPC suggests that emphasis on the low-land humid tropics and its systems may be an important aspect of focussing the proposal. On the other hand, population density, poverty levels and extent of NR degradation indicators used do not seem to support a strong case for investment in the Andes region of South America. However, future research is not articulated around actual action sites or partnerships organized into the sorts of approaches that the theoretical considerations propose.

The open-ended nature of the proposal is shared by the other system CRPs, and the lack of articulation (and the potential for overlap as it now stands) with commodity or natural resource CRPs is a matter for concern. For instance, forestry and tree crop research is expected to be important to both ecosystem integrity and livelihood opportunities in the humid tropics but there is doubt whether the correct research or providers have been chosen for this CRP or the research linked adequately to CRPs 5, 6 and 7. The ISPC is concerned (as with many of the CRPs) that governance structures are

overly defensive of current lead Center control and the Commentary draws attention to several adaptations that may be made, including the role of the CRP Executive Director. Finally, the presentation of the CRP is rather uneven and perhaps represents the speed of its assembly¹.

Recommendation: The ISPC finds that the proposal for CRP 1.2 is an ambitious attempt to pull together agricultural research efforts for the humid and sub-humid tropics globally (but with a particular focus on Africa). The proposal emphasizes that past efforts have lacked a focus on poverty, and have been too commodity-oriented rather than systems-oriented. In setting a new direction for agricultural research in these agro-ecological domains, the proponents draw heavily on contributions from innovation systems theory and complexity theory. While the ambition is applauded, and the ideas in the proposal show promise and evidence of progress towards the objectives of the CGIAR reform process, the ISPC believes the proposal is not yet fully developed to a point that would allow funders to be confident of delivery of international public goods from the proposed research and research-related activities.

Thus, the ISPC recommends that the proposal be substantially revised and resubmitted taking note of the specific recommendations in this Commentary. The ISPC further believes that budget increases within the first three years of the program should only be contemplated when the revised proposal can prioritize in concrete terms new research geared to the issues raised and the implementation plan through partnership strategies and other arrangements are consistent with the proposed theory of change.

The revised proposal therefore needs to:

- Narrow the geographical scope of the proposal to regions where a new CGIAR systems approach will have the greatest benefit in terms of poverty alleviation and ecosystem integrity.
- Prioritize research questions and approaches to be carried out at the most important action sites, paying due attention to the selection of sites and identifying jointly with other CRPs the research to be provided by other programs and partners active in humid zones. The prioritization will take account of the scientific and socio-developmental lessons learned from prior research and relate this to hypotheses to alleviate the actual situation of poverty and resource degradation at the target sites. Means to evaluate the effectiveness of the hypothesised approaches should be included in the program.
- Identify impact pathways for the new research that map directly, through aggregated research outcomes where necessary, to the SLOs.
- Similarly, the different elements of gender to be included in a gender strategy need to be drawn together coherently and linked to the processes of technological innovation and research.

¹It would appear that perhaps two major writers have had input, with differing writing styles and discipline backgrounds. The document contains a number of typographical errors, missing entries in tables or references, all of which undermines confidence. Stylistically, there are many 'motherhood and apple pie' statements and platitudes throughout the document which detract from the essence of the proposal and which should be removed in subsequent drafts.

- Consider the best means to address high priority research to enhance the contribution of tree crops to livelihoods in the humid tropics.
- Show how and in what time frame the program will change from the current aggregation of partner Centers' research to new place-based research according to the hypotheses and models espoused, and with an appropriate growth rate and budget.
- Present new governance arrangements that will enable growth of a new CRP1.2 program for the humid zones as a genuinely cross Center program working effectively with external partners.

The ISPC notes that many of these requirements are substantial. To carry out the required definition and geographical focussing of activities, and revision of the proposal with appropriate partner consultation and development both within and outside the CGIAR, will take time.

1. Strategic coherence and clarity of program objectives

The strategic direction, goal, and objectives of the CRP are appropriate and are aligned with CGIAR System-Level Outcomes (SLOs). The justification for investing in efforts in the humid tropics is provided that is consistent with the mission of the overall CGIAR system and its Strategy and Results Framework (SRF). The overall framework for the program is relatively coherent. Strategic Research Theme (SRT) 1 aims to contextualize, prioritize and focus the R4D work of the CRP, and SRT 3 aims to ensure that the vastness and diversity of this global region is exploited to learn lessons and generate international public goods. The other three SRTs (2.1, 2.2 and 2.3) aim to provide the outputs derived from systems integration research. The Program also describes the constraints to progress in meeting the SRF objectives and the many complexities in overcoming them.

A good strategic fit with the CGIAR reform process at a general level, however, by no means guarantees that the long list of proposed activities outlined in Annex 2 of the proposal will deliver the research and development outcomes necessary and sufficient to make progress on the SLOs. The current description of SRTs, objectives, activities and outputs is too broad. It is not clear how the detailed list of activities in Annex 2 has been arrived at (unless they encompass simply an aggregate of current undertakings), and what the underlying research questions were or the hypotheses to be investigated. This is one reason to suspect that the proposal, as currently drafted, attempts to merely incorporate existing activities of partner Centers, rather than follow through on the promise of new approaches. The list is too long and incoherent, with no evidence of priority-setting to guide program development. (In addition, a number of activities do not fit well with the outputs they are collected under, for example “improving health of diabetic patients” under output 2.2.3 on p149).

How large will the suite of researchable issues be (p13) and how will they be prioritized? Many more topics for study are included in appendix table 17 than time or funds will allow. This needs to be rationalized, and the proposal should not promise what cannot be delivered. The lack of focus has been a major problem with earlier “system-based” programs of the CGIAR, and this program, from the outset, needs to set boundaries around interventions for which the CGIAR and its partners have a comparative advantage. The ISPC suggests that an opportunity for achieving greater focus would be to narrow down the program to the lowland humid tropics, rather than also including the sub-humid tropics (with growing season down to 150 days). Currently the regional description is so broad as to obscure what systems the program will work on. Including the sub-humid tropics contributes to this lack of clarity and also encroaches on systems covered in other CRPs - such as the CRP on maize. Population density, levels of poverty and extent of NR degradation indicators used in this CRP do not seem to support a strong case for investment in the Andes region of South America. A closer focus on the humid tropics would allow a focus on systems in which tree crops are important. This could fill a big gap in the CGIAR portfolio and also lead to a logical agricultural complement to CRP6 on forests. There are real opportunities to look at tree crop systems that are central to the humid tropics (cocoa, coffee, rubber, oil palm, spices, etc). This opportunity is only weakly recognized and since tree crop systems raise a number of interesting issues in terms of food security and ecosystem services, it would be good to see a stronger focus on these issues. For example, the highly regarded work that IITA does in West Africa at the forest margins through the Sustainable Tree Crops Initiatives is not mentioned explicitly in this regard.

The CRP is heavily biased toward Africa which gets over 80% of the resources. The program itself suggests that a more balanced effort across the humid tropics would be preferable. Even if SSA maintains a major share, the ability to transfer lessons and even technologies to SE Asia and Latin

America will be important. With globalization all these areas are interlinked through markets and investment.

Thematically, in terms of omissions, there is almost no mention of climate change, deforestation, aquatic systems, or forests in general, despite frequent use of the term “ecosystem services”. There are major issues of natural resources and land tenure and governance that are not discussed. In fact, most of the global uncultivated land that is suited to agriculture is found in these systems, and both population and markets are driving encroachment. Trade policies and misguided incentives are often major drivers of change in these systems, and arguably much more important than local interventions. This again suggests a necessity to forge appropriate linkages to other parts of the CGIAR portfolio.

A central argument of this CRP is that commodity-focused research has not been adequate to address rural poverty in the context of a deteriorating resource base in many locations. The proposal argues that Research for Development (R4D) outputs for small-scale farming are different from those of commodity research and therefore require a different mix of approaches, beginning with innovation studies, but also including participatory and livelihoods approaches, with participants being ‘actively engaged in the construction of their own well-being’. The Program *hypothesizes* that the blend of biophysical, institutional, policy strategies brought together through their conceptual frameworks will co-create solutions, identify positive development trajectories and result in robust outcomes that are consistent with the SLOs of the CGIAR. While an interesting proposition, the Program does not intend to test this hypothesis and yet this approach is the driving force of the CRP and should be explicitly tested and monitored for efficacy.

The emphasis through much of the document is on ‘how’ to undertake systems research, rather than using research in the humid tropics which has already been completed to identify specific questions or challenges that could be addressed to deliver benefits. This is exemplified in the ‘lessons learnt’ examples (numbered 1 to 16 on p14-18), which relate much more to the research process than about identifying gaps in knowledge and opportunities for intervention. Such a degree of introspection is unhelpful as some of the insights provided by these examples are potentially useful, but this potential is not exploited within the proposal. Reference to these examples is made only twice in the text (p28 and p93) and it is not possible to identify how lessons from these examples will be used to improve the proposed research.

While the need for adaptation, adjustment and learning as part of the research process is fully understood, the Program fails to capture likely past and present component inputs as a means to “test” the validity and robustness of the new R4D approach (and fast track SRF outcomes). Instead, there is a preponderance of space and thought devoted to the networks, frameworks and approaches, rather than the outcomes required to achieve change for people living in poverty in the target Action Sites. This contrasts unfavourably with the CRP 1.3 for Aquatic-Agricultural Systems which managed to introduce a fairly radical new research agenda (with a similar philosophical foundation to CRP 1.2), while still being carefully grounded in research questions related to specific places and problems.

2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact

The proposal provides the R4D Humid Tropics Conceptual Model and the R4D Impact model to describe the outcome pathways. These are very general and lack detail. The program provides no quantifiable targets that can relate directly to the SRF. An example is the set of milestones for SRT 2.2 which deals with Systems Productivity (Appendix 2). One example of the milestones is: “Define parameters for sustainable cassava, cereal, fruit and nut production in mixed cropping systems based

on soil fertility, disease and pest cycles, prevention of soil erosion, sustainable weed management, labour availability, gender equity, and stable income generation capacity”. This is too vague and too general a measure. Indeed, the targets for delivery were described at a very high level, one at which research alone cannot deliver. It is therefore not really possible at this stage of development of the program to assess plausibility of impact.

There is no detailed conceptualization of the processes of disadvantage that underlie poverty, nor of insight as to why people make their living the way they do (p23). Only external drivers of change (such as policies) are indicated in the Framework even though disadvantage is socially constructed. For example, the proposal has adopted the language of gender and women’s advocacy but it is unclear what the pathway is for achieving outcomes to empower women. No attempt has been made to review what is known about gender relations and gender roles in the different proposed research locations. This would seem to be a first step in any gender strategy, and one that would throw light on the value of the approach focusing significantly on gender role differentiation. The different elements of gender included under the gender strategy statement need to be drawn together more coherently and linked to the processes of technological innovation and research.

The theory of change for the proposed outcomes is credible, but unproven. It is a necessary step towards achieving impact, but one that has not been rigorously validated. While it is logical, sensible and worth pursuing, sound methods for its comparative evaluation must be included in this proposal.

3. Quality of science

The proposal demonstrates good theoretical thinking and awareness of lessons learned from earlier projects on how systems research might be conducted, but the quality of proposed activities cannot be judged until a link has been made with the specific systems and challenges in the action areas. For example, it would be useful for the proponents to provide further details on the approaches that will be used to improve productivity in these systems. Mention is made (p62) of applying the approach of agro-ecological intensification, based on an understanding of system processes and external inputs. This will be an important contribution of new knowledge and is worthy of more elaboration.

There are a number of assertions in the proposal that should be contested. For example “increased migration to urban areas...leads to social economic decline in both rural and urban areas...”. This is a sweeping generalization with no evidential basis. Where are the citations to support such a statement? For every instance of migration causing problems, counter-cases can be cited of beneficial effects. The bottom line is that economic development is associated with long-term shifts of population out of agriculture, and if people are migrating in the proposed study contexts, they are doing so because they perceive higher net benefit from migration than from staying in agriculture. The process of thinking through issues is an opportunity to demonstrate rigour, and credibility in a revised proposal. To pursue this example, what are the population projections for the Action Areas, Action Sites and surrounding areas? Should the proposal be gearing for higher population density in some areas and for lower population in others? Are there situations in which livelihoods become multi-locational, with perhaps a diminished capacity for decision-taking and risk-taking in the agricultural component? Can “good exit” pathways be identified? Can technologies be geared to provide “good exits” from agriculture for those wishing to get out? These are the types of questions that seem central to the proposed sphere of work, but are addressed only tangentially, or not at all, in the proposal.

As a proposal based on a relatively new way of doing agricultural research, bringing everyone up to speed will not be an easy task. Indeed, this proposal is not simply about ‘filling knowledge gaps’. Intellectual leadership for such a new paradigm largely lies outside the CGIAR system. Although IITA has undertaken systems research since its inception, which makes it an ideal Center for the shift to new innovations thinking, the proposal does not synthesize and capture opportunities from current work even while it establishes the best innovation structures at new action sites. More rigorous analysis of past and on-going “commodity-based system” work in the humid tropics as a basis for fast tracking the new CRP would help inspire confidence.

4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management

The CRP proposes a partnership strategy that reflects the complexity of the underlying program. There are 10 participating partners, including seven Centers, FARA on behalf of the SSA Challenge Program, and two regional organizations that will align resources and research staff within the overall framework of the program. Apart from this core group, partnerships function at three levels and in a number of dimensions—at the levels of action sites, action areas and finally, regional/global relationships. The CRP relies on IITA’s R4D model for its partnership theory and model, and builds directly on the existing partnerships of the collaborating CGIAR Centers. It also acknowledges the extent to which the activities of CRP 1.2 will rely on collaboration with other CRPs to utilize and leverage their core research. The Program leaders have a good history of working with partners for outcomes in all of the proposed Action Areas.

Given the care with which the partnership strategy is articulated and the premium placed on partnership as the engine of the program’s effectiveness, the proposal appears to rely heavily on the usual partners, identified in the most generic terms [Tables 9, 11, 13 and Figure 15]. The whole does not feel greater than the sum of the parts. The proposal does not envision opportunities to engage with new partners or types of partners, or to leverage existing relationships in new ways. It also fails to demonstrate an appetite to increase the engagement of strategically significant partners by providing them with visible or substantive roles in governing or advising the program.

While it is efficient for most of the CRP’s partnerships to be facilitated at the action site and action area levels, the capacity to scale the program and to garner recognition and investment for its research agenda may necessitate a more outward looking orientation at the program management level and less obvious control on the part of the Centers. The proposed eight-member R4D Advisory Committee, which has the potential to bring influence and differing perspectives to the program, is burdened by the inclusion of three Center DGs observers, and program management, including the role of the Executive Director and the executive office, has no explicit role in building external awareness or cultivating relationships that benefit the larger goals of the program.

The range of agencies mandated in areas such as forestry is not indicated, neither are the potential contributions of forestry to “natural resources integrity”, nor are details presented of the ways in which the program will interact with higher-level clients, such as those mandated with forest areas. Will the CRP work with these types of agency directly, or via other programs (such as CRPs 6 or 7), or via other partners outside the CGIAR? This needs clarification. Given the expertise of CIFOR in dealing with a wide range of agencies (government, international, NGO, commercial) on these and related questions, it was surprising to see that CIFOR is not included as a partner in this proposal. Table 15 gives no indication of how CRP 1.2 would interact with CRP 6 and 7 at the policy level, though these two programs (from among those included) are perhaps the most concerned with higher level technical change (the “landscape developments” of Fig 10).

AVRDC is an odd partner to lead tree-related research in SE Asia given the excellent activities of ICRAF and to some extent CIFOR in this same area – and the activities of these Centers are far better aligned with humid tropics issues than are the activities of AVRDC. The relationship between the forestry and agroforestry work included in CRP6 and the work on forests and tree crops of the three systems programs is still unclear. The AVRDC activities look implausible and as the major undertaking for SE Asia appear to be an add-on to the general thrust of the program. The resources allocated to them seem excessive given their marginal role in humid tropics issues.

5. Appropriateness and efficiency of program management

IITA is the lead Center for CRP 1.2. In addition to providing accountability to the Consortium, it will provide a range of financial and management services to the CRP, including communications and contracts and grants management. The proposed structure for program management and oversight includes:

- An R4D Advisory Committee of eight members (and three Center DGs observers), to advise on priority setting, partnerships and the strategic allocation of resources and report annually to the IITA board and to the Steering Committee
- A Steering Committee, chaired by the IITA DG and initially comprising the DGs or designates from each of the participating Centers, to oversee programmatic development, approval of work plans and budgets, evaluations, overall performance and the quality of science
- The Executive Director
- A Program Management Team, comprising the strategic theme leaders and the action area coordinators
- An executive office, the staffing of which is not described in the proposal

Overall management of CRP 1.2 is closely held by IITA and by the participating CGIAR Centers through their participation on the Steering Committee. The structure communicates a strong impulse to retain the existing authority of IITA and the Centers over the shape and direction of the program.

Although, at least initially, CRP 1.2 will align existing research activities undertaken by individual centers within a new framework, the management structure does not propose to work in new ways or to require that Centers relinquish or modulate their existing interests. The strategic research theme leaders will be nominated by the participating Centers and selected by the Steering Committee. Theme leaders will continue to operate within the administrative structure of their respective Centers. Even if performance against the program's goals is an adequate measure of a theme leader's overall performance, internal and external evaluations are the primary responsibility of the Steering Committee. The R4D Advisory Committee has only a tangential relationship to the oversight of the program's performance.

The Executive Director functions more as a coordinator than a leader of the CRP, and it is unclear whether the executive office includes any staff other than the Executive Director and administrative support. A monitoring and evaluation unit, with a central coordinator based at IITA and other coordinators working in the action areas, is described only as being "supported by the program management unit" (p109). Communications, an important function both for establishing an identity

and “brand” for the program and for fulfilling a critical component of partnership, and capacity building, will be managed through the existing capacity of IITA.

The dominant role of the IITA DG, as chair of the Steering Committee, effective manager of most of the CRP’s management functions, and external face of the program, is rationalized as an essential aspect of IITA’s role as the program’s fiduciary responsibility. This is a narrow conception of how to fulfill this role and undervalues a range of alternative accountability mechanisms available to the lead Center that can accommodate delegation as well as collaborative leadership.

The proposal describes the governance and management structure as searching for that “delicate balance between inclusiveness and responsibility” (p99). In the view of the ISPC, the balance remains elusive: CRP 1.2 continues the fiction that creating an under-resourced and thinly staffed management function for these programs signals efficiency and avoids duplicative administrative functions. Instead, the true costs of management are not evident or easy to evaluate, and management of a program becomes diffuse and unnecessarily difficult. This is likely to inhibit delivery of the integrated outcomes which are the key to systems programs.

The Program Management Team as described is well structured. It includes the leaders of the strategic research themes and the Action Area coordinators, each of whom comes to their respective roles through a qualifying process that assures adequate management skill. What the team and the program lack is a clear, empowered and accountable Executive Director.

The Steering Committee does not add evidently add much value and could detract from the sense that the CRP can embody a new, more integrated and responsive approach to research. In the same way, the IITA DG has too large and influential a role, taking explicit responsibility for a range of management functions that could and should be delegated. If the DG’s role were less all encompassing, it might not be necessary to have such a large and inclusive Steering Committee, allowing the participating Centers to feel adequately represented as a group through other means.

6. Clear accountability, financial soundness and efficiency of governance

While there was a budget for partners and collaborators, the description of how these funds would be allocated was rather deficient in detail. The concept of a DG being a champion for both his/her own Center and for a CRP involving multiple Centers should be challenged.

The total budget for the project over three years is projected to be USD144.4 million. The proposal requests USD19.5 million from the Fund in 2011, rising to USD26 million in 2013, totaling USD69.2 million. The allocation of funds among the research components is supported by the narrative, with additional commentary on the impact of current restricted projects on the actual versus preferred geographic allocations between regions and action areas.

In the notes that accompany the budget (p115) three categories of expense could be usefully clarified: operating expenses, which are approximately 22 percent of program costs; institutional overhead which is about 20 percent of direct costs; and CRP management costs budgeted at 5 percent (although this last number, which totals USD2.5 million over three years, appears to be closer to 2 percent of program costs). The partnership budget includes consultancy contracts without further explanation. Finally, there is no separate line item for communications or for monitoring and evaluation. It is difficult to tell from the budget narrative and the detail whether the amount assigned to management includes these two items or they are part of another expense item.

The R4D Advisory Committee will bring together expertise and perspectives of value to the program. It is designed to have eight members and reflect the regional focus of the program, maintain a strong gender balance and incorporate relevant partnership, communications, gender and systems experience. With some adjustment in its composition and role, it represents a strong mechanism for independent oversight within the program and has the potential to contribute in significant way to increasing the confidence of partners and donors about priority setting and performance.

The initial Committee will be nominated by the participating Centers and appointed by the IITA board. The Committee is then given the flexibility to suggest new members to the IITA board and to elect a chair. Committee members have three year terms and are eligible to serve for on additional term. It is envisioned to meet two times a year, with one meeting coinciding with a meeting of the IITA board.

As proposed, the DG of IITA and two additional Center DGs will serve as “observers.” This seems excessive for a committee of this size and nature. It would be preferable to have the IITA DG serve ex officio, and for a single, additional representative of a participating Center to serve as a member of the Committee. If there is a need to give this assignment greater turnover among the Center DGs, the term for the position could be limited to three or fewer years.

The proposed terms of reference for the R4D Advisory Committee orient its work as broadly advisory to the Steering Committee, the Executive Director, the IITA Board and to partners. While it is initially described as having “a major role...on priority setting, partnerships and the strategic allocation of resources” (p101), the further description of its assigned duties mutes this potentially valuable role. In part this is the result of having a Steering Committee with many of the assigned duties that would normally go to a Committee of this kind.

CRP 1.2 is now overburdened with groups that are monitoring and commenting on its performance—a program management team, a steering committee, an advisory committee and, ultimately, the IITA board and the Consortium. Among this group, the Steering Committee is the most superfluous and appears principally to be a way to reassure participating Centers. If Center DGs need to be at the table in order to be confident that the program remains balanced, there is something more fundamentally wrong with the partnership relationships than can be resolved through a committee.

With that in mind and to strengthen the management and governance of CRP 1.2, the following recommendations are offered:

- Strengthen the terms of reference for the R4D Advisory Committee to give it a more substantial role in monitoring and evaluation, and in recommending program priorities and resource allocations. Modify the number of DGs added to the committee and clarify their role. Enable the chair of the committee to play a role in the evaluation of the program’s Executive Director.
- Eliminate the Steering Committee and redistribute its proposed functions to the Advisory Committee, the Program Management Team, or the Executive Director as appropriate.
- Strengthen the role and authority of the Executive Director to allow for the scope to lead and manage the program in an effective way. The position may still report to the IITA DG for accountability purposes, but the evaluation of the Executive Director’s performance (and future recruitment) should include the chair of the Advisory Committee. The reporting relationships between the Executive Director and the members of the Program Management

Team should also be strengthened to increase the ability of the Executive Director to manage for performance.

- Identify more clearly the management activities that will be undertaken by the program's executive office to assure that functions central to the success of the program, including communications and monitoring and evaluation, are adequately resourced and managed.