

**ISPC Commentary on the CRP-2 Proposal** *(dated Jan 2011):*  
**Policies, Institutions and Markets to Strengthen Food Security and  
Incomes for the Rural Poor**

**Summary**

CRP 2 focuses on a number of highly relevant topics related to the CGIAR's system-level objectives of food security and poverty reduction. These include global policies; investment strategies; strategic foresight and futures scenarios; system-wide priority setting; macroeconomic and international trade; institutional innovations to improve market performance, governance, and social protection policies. Many of these complement the other CRPs by being cross-country, multi-commodity, cross-sectoral, or cross-ecosystem. The proposal presents a comprehensive program around three major themes: (1) policies and investments for pro-poor growth, (2) enabling institutions and governance for the poor and (3) value chains linking smallholders to markets. The three themes each have several sub-themes, and the sub-themes together include over 60 proposed research activities. The CRP is a very ambitious and wide-ranging proposal in terms of scope of inquiry. Much valuable work central to the CGIAR's core business will be carried out under this CRP, and, as such, it constitutes a critical component of the CGIAR program portfolio.

While some of CRP 2's themes and sub-themes are coherent, innovative and well specified, a clear focus on the major problems and opportunities to be addressed is lacking.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the overall content of this CRP may have been much more sharply focused had the proponents started by identifying major problems and opportunities within the framework provided by the SRF. The relative importance of poor policies, neglected investments, inadequate institutions, and inefficient markets in constraining the achievement of the CGIAR's goals in a diverse array of developing countries, and the potential of the CGIAR through this CRP to successfully address those constraints, should be the overarching framework for the proposal.

Although some elements of a strategic framework exist within the proposal, it is not coherently presented. A better articulated strategic framework would clearly lay out, within the context of the key problems and opportunities for research, the comparative advantage of the CGIAR and the most important International Public Goods (IPGs) related to policies and institutions. Hardly any mention is made of alternative suppliers in a field where there are many high quality suppliers and yet this is essential in deciding where and how much to invest. What does the R&D landscape look like in this broad area and where are the gaps? For example, does the CGIAR have any comparative advantages in research on technologies for renewable energy use (a new activity in Theme 1), or in the financial services area (Theme 3)?

The question then is whether the restructured CGIAR approach to policy-oriented research as proposed in this CRP is an improvement on the past, and is indeed the best way to further the system-level objectives? The research program does not indicate

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<sup>1</sup> This CRP is different from other CRPs in focusing the research around a particular discipline -- economics and other social sciences -- and research on particular types of interventions such as policies, investments, governance and institutions. Other CRPs are built around priority commodity/value chain groups, specific natural resources, priority production systems, and in one case a system level objective (i.e., health and nutrition).

how it will draw on the complementary roles and intellectual assets of IFPRI and the crop- and resources-based Centers—a central pillar of the SRF document. The way that Centers will partner in this proposal needs to be made more explicit, in order to see the potential value added from the new CRP. In addition, the roles of the ARIs and NARS research partners are often not well articulated.

The proposal does have many elements of a solid program. Its themes and sub-themes are comprehensive and most seem to be appropriate. Gender perspectives are strong throughout the proposal and well developed. A number of the sub-themes, and a number of activities proposed in other sub-themes are innovative, especially in Theme 3 on linking smallholders to markets. However, the overall impression is one of ‘business-as-usual’. It is the view of the ISPC that the program as presented is too large, insufficiently focused and includes a number of activities that could be eliminated. Greater focus would also enable the CRP to present a more coherent and compelling program.

Only scant information is given in the sub-themes and research activities about outcomes and impact pathways. While new knowledge is sometimes the main constraint to more effective policies and institutions, it is frequently more about incentives, politics and vested interest, among other things. The proposal seems to assume key clients are ready and waiting for the CRP’s outputs—that is, strong demand characterizes this marketplace. In fact, one of the biggest challenges in achieving uptake of the outputs of policy research is to first ensure (or cultivate) a demand for and realization of the usefulness and value of such outputs to policy makers and their advisors. The inclusion of a sub-theme on policy processes is a welcome addition to better understanding impact pathways in this challenging area.

In terms of scientific quality, the proposal rests on the well established reputation of the main proponent, IFPRI, as strong selling point. Yet, it pays insufficient attention to scientific underpinnings of some sub-themes and activities (especially for challenging new activities), and does not discuss any mechanisms to ensure scientific quality. Its innovation strategy focuses on methods and data sources that are fairly standard in social science research. Importantly, there is no “data strategy” that would leverage economies of scale and scope across its research activities and thereby contribute to high payoff IPGs.

### **Recommendation**

**The ISPC recommends that CRP2 be resubmitted after substantial revisions, taking into account the detailed commentary, but focusing in particular on:**

- Identification and elaboration of key problems and opportunities for research on specific agricultural and rural development policies, investments, institutions and markets that offer greatest scope for measurable progress towards CGIAR goals;
- Further development of a strategic framework that encompasses, *inter alia*, clearer articulation of priorities and rationale for them—across and within sub-themes, an assessment of alternative research providers and CGIAR comparative advantage, and a clear focus on production of well-defined and high priority IPGs;
- Application of the strategic framework to develop a more focused and coherent research program around major constraints and opportunities;
- More specific elaboration of the key outcomes and impacts being targeted by sub-themes or activities, and the impact pathway narratives for those;

- Further elaboration of the specific roles and synergies of IFPRI and other CGIAR and non-CGIAR partners working together (over existing arrangements).

## **1. Strategic coherence and clarity of Program objectives**

Three key questions not adequately addressed in this proposal are: (1) how important are improvements in developing country policies, institutions and markets in achieving CGIAR goals; (2) what is the scope for realizing modest (or major) changes in policies, institutions and markets through the research proposed here; and (3) what is the CGIAR's comparative advantage in undertaking this research? To answer these questions we need to know something about the major constraining factors to realizing those improvements and how central they are to development efforts. Secondly, some indication should be given of where the best bets are, i.e., the most likely areas of influence that can be expected to have large returns in terms of CGIAR goals across the range of CRP2's themes, sub-themes and activities. Put simply, what are some of the big achievements that might come from CRP 2 research within a given timeframe, if done well and impact pathways flow? And what are the biggest risks to meeting these achievements?

These questions argue for more attention to priority setting. There is no reference to any systematic priority setting process, and there are only weakly justified references to priorities within each sub-theme. Priorities are indicated in a general manner (by placing the highest priority sub-themes and activities in front) but the rationale and logic are not explicit. An analysis of regional priorities is missing for the overall proposal, although for some specific sub-themes and research activities, there is an indication of regional targeting.

Although the preface suggests that business as usual is not an option, the overall structure closely mirrors that of IFPRI's programs and this conveys the impression that the proponents were unable to get beyond current activities of the CGIAR. Indeed, the overall content of this CRP may have been much more sharply focused with many elements eliminated had the proponents started by identifying major problems and opportunities within the framework provided by the SRF (limited as it is). Based on the SRF one might have structured CRP 2 around a major problem set defined by food security and poverty reduction (MDG1). Although many of the core elements are in the proposal, the overall strategic framework is weakly articulated, and the sub-themes within each of the three themes are often not logically connected to the theme. For example, social protection is under Theme 1, and policy processes now in Theme 1 would fit better in Theme 2 on governance.

Admittedly, the CRP is initially constrained by the current work program and special project funding. However, at a minimum the CRP should lay out a vision of where it wishes to be in five years' time. Glimpses of this vision of new and exciting work are apparent in places but too infrequently to change the perception of business as usual. The most innovative activities address key unresolved questions, such as social protection (necessary to reach many of the rural poor that cannot be helped via agriculture); policy processes (necessary to achieve policy and institutional impact of research); institutions to strengthen the assets of the poor; and impact evaluation methods for coordination within value chains (an important virgin field).

Above all, the proposal needs more focus: 62 "research activities" in total are described, each with a paragraph or two devoted to them. Indeed, several issues seem

to be repeated across themes—decentralization, extension, input supply, and regulatory services, for example. Theme 1 suffers from having to mop up everything that does not fit elsewhere and this is evident in the all-embracing and rather contorted objective corresponding to this theme:

“Improved forecasting, public resource allocation, and policy options for research and investment and to build capacity for priority setting, sequencing, targeting, implementation, and decision making focused on increasing agricultural productivity and enhancing rural incomes” (p. 3)

This CRP only covers part of the policy work of the CGIAR system, with the remainder included in the other CRPs. More rationale could be given as to what policy research goes where in the CRP portfolio. For example, why are tools and policies for sustainable land and water management included here rather than in CRP5? A zero-based planning exercise would likely have arrived at a significantly smaller and more focused program for this CRP, with several research activities of this CRP finding a more suitable home in other CRPs (e.g., soil and water management, carbon sequestration, extension innovations to “change the design of crop and livestock technology generation and adoptability”, and some work on value chains) or being eliminated completely from the CRP portfolio.

The roles of and synergies with IFPRI vis-à-vis other CGIAR Centers are not well articulated in the proposal. Presumably by working with other Centers, IFPRI social scientists can gain from access to expertise in the natural sciences and vice versa. One area where this is especially apparent is in production and technology policies in Theme 1. The proposal should emphasize—beyond the few references in some sub-themes and research activities—where the real added value of this work is in this CRP, including its linkages with other CRPs. More generally, the program design could be improved by clarifying the different types of knowledge and expertise that different partners bring to the table.

With respect to thematic choice and focus, Theme 1 is an essential area in which IFPRI has a record of achievement, but includes a wide variety of seemingly disconnected sub-themes, which buries some highly relevant new proposals. Theme 2 is more convincing and generally consistent with CGIAR comparative advantage and most activities would not fit well in other CRPs. Theme 3 which emphasizes the demand side of agricultural growth (so often neglected in the CGIAR) has a number of interesting researchable topics but contains a huge portfolio—many projects beg the question of comparative advantage of the CGIAR.

Some explicit attention is given to the IPG nature of research in various sub-themes and research activities, but in many cases this is not obvious. More explicit attention to the types of research products that will produce IPGs is needed.

Finally, there is no analysis in the proposal of alternative suppliers of research. Indeed, considering what the alternative research providers are doing would have led to a much tighter set of research activities, and especially sub-activities. This lacuna is especially apparent in sub-theme 1.2 on macro-economic, international trade and non-agricultural policies affecting agriculture and rural development, where many topics are being capably pursued by other global and regional organizations and institutions.

## **2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact**

It is not possible to determine from the proposal whether the planned outputs are feasible and appropriate relative to the resources and timeframe. The proposal is quite

variable with respect to providing adequate narratives, sound justifications and explicit delivery foci across the sub-themes and research activities, and in many cases they are not convincing. Much of the proposal reads as a series of studies without identifying the main users and pathways to reach those users, or even the products that are likely to have the major IPG elements.

The proposal rightly recognizes that high quality research outputs alone are not enough to achieve impact; they must be taken up and used (p. 80). More attention, therefore, should be given to this dimension when describing the sub-themes and how the results of research enter the policy making process. Indeed, a fuller treatment and discussion of the way research feeds into policy, which has been the subject of much debate and thoughtful analysis, would be very pertinent to this CRP.<sup>2</sup>

Table 10.2 provides a sample of outputs, outcomes and impacts (only initial propositions) from CRP 2 and is a good first step in developing an impact assessment framework. It will be critical to elaborate in more detail the ways and means of moving from outputs (which have a relatively higher probability of success) to outcomes (a much lower probability of success), and ultimately to impacts (even lower probability of success). What are the challenges therein, who are the key players and what strategies will the CRP adopt? The question remains: how to ensure effective demand for CRP 2 products and a high likelihood of uptake? In most cases it would be useful to conceptualize this by starting with the desired outcome, e.g., improved extension systems in target countries (sub-theme 1.3) and working backwards to describe the critical research outputs from one or more activities and the factors that need to be in place in order to realize that outcome.

The proposal recognizes the key role of partnerships in delivering along the pathway. Three ‘impact pathways’ (Fig. 10.1) are described (informing policy researchers, influencing international development community, and influencing government policy), but in fact most CRP 2’s outputs target a broad clientele rather than providing a full output-outcome-impact pathway. The issue is whether there will be genuine buy-in from those who need to take on board the research-derived information to turn them into outcomes. It is essential that the proposal spells out clearly the impact pathways—linkages between outputs, outcomes, and impacts—not only at the program level but especially at the sub-theme level. The best treatment of these subjects is in the description of sub-theme 2.2 on collective action and property rights, which presents a more detailed narrative on the research strategy, the multiple pathways through which outcomes and impacts are pursued, and the types and scale of expected outcomes. Most other sub-themes list outputs, outcomes, and partners, but few articulate strategies for ensuring that outputs will be used or “theories of change” indicating how use of outputs is expected to achieve outcomes and impacts.

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<sup>2</sup> In her classic article on the many meanings of research utilization, Weiss (1979) drew attention to the complexity of the impact pathway, and conceptualized research use in the context of the policy making process. Alternative routes of influence were identified ranging from direct application of research results taken up by policy-makers (“knowledge-driven” and “problem-solving” models) to more partial and indirect influence (“interactive”, “political” and “tactical” models) to cases where research generates findings that may even run counter to prevailing opinion (the “enlightenment” model). The problem-solving model is probably the prevailing imagery of research utilization but it is not unreasonable to assume that this model of research describes a relatively small number of cases. The political and enlightenment models are often the most common routes of influence, when they occur.

The Country Strategic Support Programs (CSSPs) mentioned in Table 4.1 are a promising vehicle for lifting the CRP profile at the country level, staying close to the issues and facilitating the research and delivery of results in the developing world. More might have been said about the extent to which these have helped improve the uptake of IFPRI policy recommendations to date.<sup>3</sup> At the global level, the CGIAR needs to strive to get their voice heard in places like Davos, G20 meetings, and other global fora and this is the CRP that should lead that effort.

Gender perspectives are strong throughout the proposal and well-articulated. The capacity development strategy, emphasizing collaborative research partnerships to enhance relevance and uptake, is sound.

### **3. Quality of science**

Based on the limited descriptions and citations in the proposal, it is hard to assess the quality of the science proposed. It is rarely addressed, except by some reference to specific methodologies and types of data to be used. Some of these have been listed in the proposal and include advanced econometric methods, model-based simulation analyses, strategic foresight assessments, social network analysis, value-chain analysis, qualitative analyses, participatory action research, experimental approaches and randomized controlled approaches, and gender and intra-household analysis. For the most part, they appear to be appropriate. Innovative elements are most apparent in Theme 3 on value chains. For some new topics, e.g., addressing constraints to policy changes and political economy of agrarian change and relations (Theme 1), insufficient attention is paid to the basic theoretical framework that will be needed to make progress in this challenging area.

In terms of the quality of the research teams and leadership, IFPRI's reputation is well known and highly regarded and they continue to publish and plan to publish in respected economic and development journals. There is some capacity for policy-related research at a number of other CGIAR Centers, and the ARI partners have particular strengths and expertise as well.

The absence of a clear data strategy has long been a problem for the CGIAR in general, and for IFPRI in particular. The new CRP is an opportunity for the CGIAR to articulate and implement a data strategy that will support the emergence of datasets that are IPGs, and realize economies of scale and scope for CRP2 and for the CGIAR in the longer run. Some good examples exist in the program such as the Agricultural Science and Technology Indicators that could be highlighted. Sub-theme 2.3 on institutions to strengthen assets for the poor is an example of a research agenda that would benefit from continuous panel data collection to analyze the consequences for managing food security, risk and vulnerability.

Subthemes 1.1 (Strategic foresight) treats big picture issues that are well suited to a global approach and of broad interest within the CG and beyond. Much of the work will be valuable for formulating future CGIAR SRF and priorities and should be a high priority for the CGIAR. Still, one would like to see a stronger effort to reach out to crop scientists, and to other sectors such as energy and forests that are increasingly connected to agriculture.

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<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, no mention is made of the CSSPs in the discussion of "Ensuring Uptake" on pp. 80-81 and they were not listed under sub-theme 6.1 in the text (though they are found there in Annex table 1).

Sub-theme 1.3 on production and technology policies with 13 diffuse topics needs a much sharper focus on the key research questions and a stronger justification for its relatively large budget (\$13.2 m). Concerns are:

- a) the research targets are very diffuse and poorly defined, such as the work on germplasm exchange;
- b) the rationale for a focus on policies to promote greater attention for new and underutilized species (p. 20) is not strong given that such work tends to be location-specific and difficult to scale up with very few success stories;
- c) the key policy questions to be addressed in projects relating to renewable energy and energy efficient agriculture are not articulated;
- d) the rationale for including work on sustainable natural resources management and carbon sequestration in this CRP is not provided;
- e) no attention is given to seed systems, a major constraint on productivity growth in many poor countries;
- f) the use of nano-technology to improve agriculture in low-income developing countries seems like a long-shot. What specific examples of success do we have for use of nano-technology for agriculture in highly developed countries?

While Sub-theme 1.4 (social protection policies) is a topic of the highest importance, there are numerous other academic, think-tank and R&D organizations deeply involved in this broad area of development. To gain from CGIAR's comparative advantage, this sub-theme should focus more on links to agriculture.

Sub-theme 1.6 (policy processes) should be given high priority, as it is very relevant in terms of enhancing the rate of success in moving from outputs to outcomes. It should be made clear how the CRP will engage partners to bring new skills and thinking in this important area. The budgets for this sub-theme and sub-theme 1.5 (which are new) do seem high given the risks involved.

Sub-theme 2.3 on 'institutions to strengthen the assets of the poor' lays out a highly interesting and very important development agenda, but its link to agriculture development is more tenuous. It remains to be seen to what extent and where the CGIAR with a budget of only \$6.7m should enter an already crowded field.

Theme 3 (markets), even though a traditional area of IFPRI research, provides good descriptions and rationale for importance and value of this research in introduction, methods, research questions, partnerships, and impact pathway sections. This theme is well articulated, and hence convincing even if overly ambitious. Research under this theme will need to be designed within the context of highly diverse and increasingly differentiated value chains (low value vs high value commodities, for example)

#### **4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management**

The discussion of partnerships (p. 67-69) is thoughtful, well-conceived and rightly emphasizes the fundamental importance of partnerships, both strategic and boundary: "the selection of partners will receive particular attention in CRP 2 because achieving the most impact with our work will require us to get this right from the very beginning" (p. 69). The ISPC endorses that perspective and believes it will be essential that IFPRI and other CGIAR Centers develop an explicit strategy for identifying and engaging the right partners in the most appropriate way, with co-decision making responsibilities and adequate funding. Real ownership by partners requires their upfront involvement and since the proposal is still in a formative stage (considering various 'candidates' for partners), it must rapidly transform this from a

currently IFPRI-oriented program to a truly joint program with other Centers, ARIs, NARS. It does appear that some of the core partners were engaged in the strategic and research planning but the mechanisms that will be used to allocate funds to partners are not discussed in the proposal, nor are their financial and in-kind contributions.

Linkages between the CRPs in the policy area are complex, but these are described for six of the CRPs where the intersection with CRP 2 is expected to be significant (nicely summarized in Table 7.1), and the proposed iterative approach via learning by doing is a sensible way to go. In due course, the rationales for demarcation between CRPs and ways in which synergies can be achieved should be spelled out.

One of the main challenges for the CRP will be to develop good working relationships, incentives, and commitment on the part of diverse partners whose organizations have different goals, priorities, and cultures, and who are likely to be operating under severe resource constraints.

Within this program, Theme 3 is likely to be the most challenging in this regard, because there are more, and more diverse, partners from the CGIAR and outside, and the individuals involved represent a greater diversity of interests and organizational cultures. This is also an area in which a natural leadership role for the CGIAR is not clear. Bringing these activities together into a coherent program will be challenging but offers considerable potential benefits, in terms of synergy, knowledge sharing, learning, and the production of IPGs.

The proposal rightly emphasizes the critical importance of effective communications (p. 74-76), internal and external, in diverse channels for realizing success/impact, particularly important for policy related outputs.

## **5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management**

Given its mission and the fact that approximately 80 percent of the budget for CRP2 derives from IFPRI, it makes sense for IFPRI to be the lead Center. As such, it will provide a range of financial and management services to the CRP, provide accountability to the Consortium, and serve as “home” for the Director and the program’s management unit.

The proposal is rightly cautious about creating a management structure that is any larger or more bureaucratic than it considers acceptable, but goes on to acknowledge that initial assumptions about relying on the capacity of participating Centers to implement certain proposal activities as cross-Center teams may need to be revisited.

The management structure begs the questions of the incentives for the Centers to relinquish authority in the interests of creating alignment and efficiencies in the management of critical CRP-level functions. There is little evidence to support the hopeful scenario that Centers will collaborate in promoting the accomplishments and resource requirements of the CRP. Further, the management plan does not give any indication how other Centers will be involved with program management. Will they have representation on the Management Team? Can scientists from other Centers, NARS, or ARIs be a Research Theme Leader?

While it seems logical that IFPRI would host the program and be accountable to the CGIAR Consortium Board for its execution, its prominent role in establishing and implementing management policies and in conflict resolution may undermine the incentives of other potential partners and their commitment to the program, on the grounds that “it is dominated by IFPRI.” The heavy concentration of management



within the lead Centre has been recognized by the Consortium Board and the ISPC is pleased to note that a more inclusive management structure is expected to be presented to the Fund Council (submission letter of CB Chair 3 March 2011).

A monitoring plan will be developed under each sub-theme, which will include milestones for activities, outputs and networking to facilitate the uptake of project outcomes. The milestones will provide the basis for evaluations of the use of project outputs and their influence.

#### **6. Clear accountability and financial soundness, and efficiency of governance**

This CRP has a Scientific Advisory Panel (SAP) similar to that of CRP7. Because the SAP is appointed by the lead Center's Board of Directors, the question of independence remains. Assuming that issue can be resolved, the SAP provides a reasonable approach for building into the CRP an independent body to advise the program, review and approve priorities and requests for funding, and act as a first line reviewer of the program's effectiveness in terms of strategy and results. This is particularly true given the overwhelming level of investment that IFPRI will have in the program compared to other CG Centers and its role as lead Center. However, the proposal is not clear about where the authority to commission independent or external evaluations resides. It is one thing for IFPRI to be legal fiduciary; it is another for it to play an immediate oversight role in the face of potential for conflicts of interest.

Very little information is provided to evaluate whether the budget is appropriate, and expenditures for subthemes 3.1 and 3.2 are missing from Table 13.2. It also unclear why expenditures by CRP partners have large differences among CG Centers with comparable mandates (e.g., ICARDA versus ICRISAT or CIAT). Likewise, IRRI, CIFOR and Africa Rice do not appear in any budget although their policy related research needs to be linked to CRP2.