

21 June 2011

ISPC Commentary on the revised proposal for CRP2: Policies, Institutions and Markets to strengthen Food Security and Incomes for the Rural Poor
(Revision of May 2011)

In its commentary on the initial version of the CRP2 proposal, the ISPC recognized the core role of CRP2 research in relation to the CGIAR system-level objectives of food security and poverty reduction. There was little doubt about the importance of producing a body of knowledge to support appropriate policies, institutions and markets for pro-poor agricultural growth. But the ISPC also noted serious weaknesses in the proposal as presented: The initial version lacked a clear focus on major problems and opportunities; avoided serious discussion of comparative advantage and alternative providers; lacked clarity with respect to priorities and rationales for them; assumed scientific quality without mechanisms to ensure it; failed to specify sufficiently how the research would increase the likelihood of achieving the key outcomes and impacts being targeted; and, finally, offered little insight on how a collaborative research program –focused mainly on social science research – would work synergistically across 12 CGIAR institutions (rather than just dividing the cake).

After carefully reviewing the revised CRP2 proposal and the accompanying document explaining the revisions, the ISPC considers that the revised proposal, while attempting to address some of the concerns raised by the FC and ISPC, and providing significantly more clarity in presentation, retains key deficiencies from the original proposal. The FC commentary outlined a number of substantial “must haves” for a revised proposal. While all of the 14 points (5 from the ISPC, 9 from the FC) have been addressed by the proponents in the revised proposal document, there are hardly any instances in which the modification represents a substantive change, i.e., a significant shift in research priorities, research methods and approaches, or a significant change in the way in which the proposed program will operate.

The ISPC, however, takes note of several areas where progress has been made:

- Illustrating how the themes contribute to CGIAR SLOs (Table 2.1) and specifying measurable impacts by 2025.
- Clarifying linkages across themes, in the overview and through cross references within the sub-themes.
- Explaining the participatory process to be used for selecting priorities in the future.
- Discussing IPGs and showing how they contribute to knowledge generation and development outcomes.
- Improving presentation through consolidation of activities within subthemes.
- Cataloguing the entire list of partnerships (Annex 4).
- Rationalizing the work on a number of topics such as sustainable natural resources management, nano-technology, neglected and underutilized species and agro-biodiversity.

These are certainly positive developments, commendable given the very limited timeframe provided for revising this proposal. There remain, however, a number of outstanding issues in the “must have” category that were raised in the previous ISPC commentary but where the revised proposal falls short, as enumerated below.

In retrospect, it was not realistic for the proponents of CRP2 to have attempted to make the substantial revisions indicated by the FC and ISPC in a matter of about a month¹. For example, major revisions made by the proponents to the initial submission of the GRiSP-CRP in response to FC/ISPC advice, took almost three months to complete, and this for a CRP focused on a single commodity and involving only 3 centres (and many partners). The ISPC believes that the major revisions requested of the proponents of CRP2 will require significantly more time to address in a substantive manner (not merely presentational), and several months should be considered a minimum for this purpose—especially where additional analysis and discussion with partners would benefit the value of the program, e.g., particularly in relation to the first two bullet points below. Given the more fundamental concerns raised here and their complexity, and the large number of Centers and partners involved, a significantly longer period of time to properly address them might be expected .

The ISPC recommends that the CRP2 proposal should be re-submitted after major revisions to address four key areas highlighted in its original commentary:

- **analysis and articulation of the major problems and opportunities for research related to agricultural and rural development policies, institutions and markets;**
- **development of a strategic framework that encompasses (in addition to point above):**
 - **analysis and elaboration of CGIAR’s comparative advantage in addressing specific development issues through research on policies, institutions and markets, against the backdrop of relevant alternative suppliers**
 - **articulation of the major priorities and rationale for them;**
- **enumeration of the value added of this CRP over existing work, particularly via collaborations within the CGIAR**
- **description and reasonable expectations about outcomes and impact pathways**

These concerns are further elaborated below.

(1) The FC and ISPC requested a clear focus on the major problems and opportunities, specifically *“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.”* The revised version addresses this point in the Rationale and the CRP2 SRF sections (1 and 2). Paragraphs such as on p.11, listing how “[c]urrent policies, institutions and markets suffer from some important gaps and failures, including the following:...” are not developed - only a single sentence (or two) is given for each of the five ‘gaps and failures’. No real analysis is shown of how these constraints impede progress towards meeting system-level outcomes (SLOs). That said, within the specific themes, this version is considerably more problem- and question-oriented than the initial version. It remains the case, however, that problems are almost always presented as ‘generic’, as if relevant everywhere in the same way, e.g., generic examples cited in Table 3.2. The heterogeneity in policies, institutions and markets across regions, countries and locations surely must be an issue of central importance for the design and implementation of this CRP. Furthermore, to have greatest impact, it is crucial to identify where and when particular problems are most relevant, and where there are the best opportunities to have impact—and keep a tight focus on these. The ISPC would expect to see a more explicit analysis of key problems leading to an understanding of the relative importance of poor policies, neglected investments, inadequate institutions, and inefficient or non-functioning markets in constraining the achievement of food and agricultural development goals in a diverse array of developing countries. This sets the stage for developing a strategic framework focusing on the most relevant (from the CGIAR’s perspective) development constraints for contributing to the SLOs.

¹ The revised version of the CRP was submitted to the Consortium on 20 May 2011, three weeks after the FC meeting minutes were finalized.

(2a) The issue of comparative advantage within the context of building a strategic framework and setting priorities received little attention in the first version. Indeed, hardly any mention was made of alternative suppliers in a field with many high quality suppliers. This prompted a recommendation from the ISPC on the need for “*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*”. In this version, a paragraph is added in section 1 (Rationale) explaining this issue. It may be true that IFPRI is by far the largest social science research institution focusing on agriculture and rural economy related issues, but in many of the specific themes and sub-themes, there are many other providers. The CRP argument for comparative advantage is related to the CGIAR’s *mandate, independence and scale*. The first one is irrelevant (having a mandate does not make it the most efficient supplier). More importantly, little effort is made to explicitly discuss the comparative advantage in the more detailed development of the research themes². To quote the CRP position on the comparative advantage in macro-economic work, (an area that the ISPC specifically questioned on comparative advantage), “The CGIAR is uniquely positioned to address these issues. No other institution has the clear mission and the expertise to analyze how these macro-economic, trade, and investment policies may affect global food security and small producers’ income in an increasingly complex world”. Yet, sub-themes such as macro-modeling (1.2), social protection (1.4), collective action and property rights (2.3), and asset strengthening (2.4) – as well as more specific parts within these sub-themes from work on social capital to work on financial services – all have rather specialized groups outside the CGIAR working on them. Undoubtedly, a clear case can be made for CGIAR strategic investment in many of the sub-themes and topics, but the ISPC was looking for a more insightful discussion of how the CGIAR fits into a competitive global market for policy research. A clear understanding of one’s comparative advantage is essential for establishing the CRPs specific strategic priorities. The ISPC expects to see as a basic requirement of CRP2’s strategic framework, an analysis of the global R&D landscape related to the key researchable issues (i.e., who is doing what and where are the gaps?) as a basis for a clear articulation of the CGIAR’s own comparative advantage in addressing them.

(2b) The need for a clearer articulation of priorities and rationale for them—across and within sub-themes, was highlighted in the ISPC commentary. Section 3 (on priority setting, impact pathways, monitoring and evaluation) is a new section, added in response to these comments. This is clearly the place where quite a few of the issues and major concerns raised should have been dealt with. The new section offers a glimpse of a systematic approach to setting priorities, weighing costs and benefits of the proposed research to be applied during implementation of the CRP, and this is certainly welcome. But the *basis and rationale* of the current portfolio is not provided and the CRP still comes across as ‘business-as-usual’. At a minimum, an attempt should be made to map these topics *along with the new directions* within a priority setting framework that results in a more coherent program based on the “extensive priority setting and consultation with key stakeholders” (p.14). For example, some sense should be given in the proposal of the relative importance of the outputs and outcomes listed in Table 3.2 (but specified by target group or region) in terms of helping meet the CGIAR’s SLOs. The ISPC expects to see a more transparent description of the basis for the chosen themes and sub-themes, drawing on the consultations with relevant stakeholders and consistent with the problem and opportunity framework and the comparative advantage analysis (as per above).

(3) The first version of the CRP2 proposal lacked much discussion of how the different partners within and outside the CGIAR would work together. Of specific relevance is how the research program will draw on the complementary roles and intellectual assets of IFPRI and the crop- and resources-based CGIAR Centers - a point central to demonstrating the potential value added from the new CRP. In the revision, more attention is given to this, but overall it remains rather puzzling. It is stated that the

² At the same time, it is surprising not to see on their list other elements of comparative advantage, aspects such as, i) past relevant experience ii) current strong competencies (leaders in the field) in policies, markets and governance; iii) interdisciplinary teams of researchers working together within and across Centers; iv) location in 'the field', i.e., at the interface of academic research and policy makers/development organizations.

social scientists from the other CGIAR Centers involved will work together on the delivery of the program. While there is much detail on non-CGIAR partners, although mostly for downstream implementation, rarely do we get any details on how this will happen within the CGIAR and for which sub-themes. Indeed Annex 1, which details the activities of Centers within the program, is symptomatic of this general problem—each Center is listed separately with little sign that any work will be jointly undertaken with IFPRI or other Centers. Surely one of the key motivations for this CRP is to consolidate work across Centers in order to derive synergies. For example, ICRISAT, the largest budget recipient after IFPRI, proposes to do work on topics and issues that appear to have no link whatsoever with IFPRI, and indeed most of this would appear to be better placed with other CRPs such as legumes or dryland cereals or systems. Overall, the CRP portrays an effort to divide the cake rather than develop truly collaborative work on delivering a program. While some allowance must surely be made for continuing the current work and commitments of each Center, the ISPC would expect to see a transition towards a more forward-looking, well integrated CGIAR policy, institutions and markets research agenda based on priorities developed for the CRP and exploiting synergies among the various types of expertise available within and outside the CGIAR.

(4) Relatively little information was given in the sub-themes and research activities of the original proposal 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, vested interest or lack of will. This is recognized in the narrative under policy processes (sub-theme 2.1), but it begs the question of the plan and strategy for ensuring maximum likelihood of uptake of the research products *from this CRP* to specific clients to ensure impact across the rest of the sub-themes. The ISPC expects to see a more convincing treatment and discussion of the ways to maximize the probability of uptake of the research in policy decisions.

Several other points deserve comment in relation to quality and relevance of science issues. As mentioned in the previous ISPC commentary, the quality of science in this proposal rested on IFPRI's reputation, yet insufficient attention is given to the scientific underpinnings. A large number of high quality US and European universities have invested substantially in social sciences research on development issues, especially in economics. The CGIAR Centers cannot be complacent and *assume* that what they do and how they do their research remains generally recognized as state of the art – from areas such as the various modeling approaches (as in theme 1) or the policy interpretation of much survey data analysis (as across all themes). The ISPC was looking for clear mechanisms to assure continued quality across these various competencies. It would be helpful to see an outline of the mechanisms that will be put in place to assure the quality of science across these various topics and more thought (expression) given to whether particular methods can really answer the research questions in each case.

Under Sub-theme 1.3. the revisions and justifications for policy research related to seed systems, sustainable NRM, carbon sequestration and renewable energy are appropriate. The justification given for research to support sustainable conservation and use (promotion) of neglected and underutilized species, NUS (based on calls for greater R&D efforts by the international community) does not necessarily mean the CGIAR should take up that challenge. Issues of comparative advantage and relevance (*vis-à-vis* other opportunities), particularly considering the highly location specific nature of the work, all need to be examined more closely. Producing generic methodological frameworks and tools, alone, do not provide that justification. Rather the likelihood of this research generating IPGs relevant for achieving CGIAR SLOs on a large scale should be of paramount importance. The rationale for including research on nanotechnologies for developing countries (when scant evidence of its application in developed countries is presented) is also not compelling.

In conclusion, the ISPC believes the CRP review process to-date has not allowed sufficient time for proponents to address what are often fundamental issues arising in the context of these reviews. The ISPC is convinced that valuable work central to the CGIAR's core business will be carried out under CRP2 and, as such, constitutes a critical component of the portfolio of CRP programs. However, the proposal requires further revision and amplification in several key areas. This CRP clearly has the

potential to become a flagship of the CGIAR but it must address these critically important issues and make a more compelling case if it is to claim its rightful place in the new CGIAR.