

SCIENCE COUNCIL OF THE CGIAR

Comments on the Meta-Review of CGIAR Systemwide and Ecoregional Programs Report prepared by Seme Debela (Chair), Ian Bevege and Paul Egger (March 2007)

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Background on SWEPS

Ecoregional programs emerged in the CGIAR in the 1990s as an operational mechanism involving several CGIAR Centers for undertaking research at the landscape level in priority agroecological zones. Systemwide programs emerged at around the same time with research focused around a particular research theme and problem common to all or a group of Centers. Some did adopt an ecoregional approach to research but others developed more as communities of practice sharing approaches to common subject matter. Systemwide programs therefore developed global or broader cross-regional applications than the ecoregional programs. There are currently 17 CGIAR Systemwide and Ecoregional Programs (SWEPS).¹ They have been developed over time with different motivations. They are usually convened by a nominated lead Center of the CGIAR. However, they are intended to complement the Center-specific programs and also the newer Challenge Programs (CP) as a mechanism to implement CGIAR research.² Furthermore, Centers operating in SSA are engaging in a new planning activity, sub-regional Medium-Term Plans, which may facilitate Systemwide activities and yield SWEPS in these sub-regions.

The CGIAR is particularly interested in reviewing the status of these different SWEPS as appropriate research instruments for implementing System Priorities for research, approved by the CGIAR in 2005. It is therefore timely to collate and analyze the experience the CGIAR has had with SWEPS with a view to optimizing their contribution to implementing the CGIAR research priorities.

The current status of SWEPS has recently been documented in a SC working document.³ The SWEPS have been monitored and evaluated primarily by external reviews commissioned by the SC and by external reviews commissioned by the convening centers (Center

¹ Consisting of 8 ecoregional programs and 9 Systemwide programs all established over the period 1992-2001.

² The CPs are also instruments for conducting research in partnerships. The CPs operate on a larger scale than most SWEPS. CPs were introduced to bring a new programmatic approach to CGIAR research; they were designed to be time bound, to increase external partnerships and attract funding for major research problems. They usually have an “independent” structure for management and oversight and with that higher overhead costs. The specific characteristics of these two types of multi-partner programs—CP and SWEPS- have not been fully analysed and the potential for matching the appropriate implementing vehicle with the new system priorities has not yet been explored.

³<http://www.sciencecouncil.cgiar.org/publications/pdf/SC%20Draft%20Status%20of%20M&E%20of%20CGIAR%20SWEPS.pdf>

Commissioned external reviews or CCERs) although not on a regular interval. Fourteen of the 17 ongoing SWEPS have been reviewed by an external team. Also the SC has recently revised its guidelines for assessing SWEPS proposals.⁴ In addition, to facilitate monitoring of research planning and evaluation, the convening centers report on the SWEPS for which they are responsible as part of the Center's rolling three year Medium Term Plans (MTPs). SWEPS were originally intended to be long term research programs and as such time limitations were not part of their design. However the CGIAR TAC's (2000) review recommended that each program should undertake a 'sunset review' every ten years to assess whether it should continue or close, either because it has met its objectives or because it is no longer viable.

With this background, the SC commissioned a Meta review of the SWEPS using existing review reports of individual SWEPS, Center EPMP reports, available summary reports, MTPs, the document on CGIAR Priorities and other relevant documentation available at Centers with the objectives of providing strategic recommendations for the future of the current CGIAR SWEPS and for defining the potential role of SWEPS in the implementation of System Priorities. The **Terms of reference for the Meta Review of SWEPS were:**

1. How successful have SWEPS been; in contributing through joint research and capacity building to achieve CGIAR goals? Identify the key research elements for a successful SWEPS profile. Have SWEPS contributed to regional capacity building?
2. How can the SWEPS research modality best contribute to the implementation of CGIAR System Priorities? What are some advantages or disadvantages of using the SWEPS structure as an instrument for implementing the System Priorities as compared with other partnership programs e.g. Challenge Programs? Identify those SWEPS that with no, or some, modification could serve as vehicles for the implementation of any of the 20 CGIAR system priorities.
3. To what extent have the existing SWEPS contributed to the pool of knowledge on research management and how have they influenced current research management practices in the CGIAR Centers? Identify best practices as well as bottlenecks to successful implementation of SWEPS.
4. Identify the key institutional factors of a successful SWEPS, in terms of resulting in effective and efficient inter-center management arrangements and in attracting financial and human resources. Analyze the specific role of the convening Center, as this center generally has higher responsibilities and transaction costs with respect to the SWEPS.
5. How well has the governance structure of each SWEPS worked in terms of effectiveness and efficiency? Are there clear roles and responsibilities of all partners that also reflect their respective complementary advantages? Is there clear evidence of a consultative process among research partners and stakeholders? Is the governance and coordination structure of each SWEPS suited to meet its research objectives?

⁴ CGIAR Science Council (2006) Criteria for Assessing Proposals for new Systemwide Programs <http://www.sciencecouncil.cgiar.org/Publications/pdf/SWEPS.pdf>. Proposals for new Systemwide programs are now assessed according to criteria that include consistency with CG System Priorities, fixed time lines and whether the expected results could be achieved by other research mechanisms such as regular partnerships agreements. These criteria are additional to those on which the original proposals and most subsequent reviews have been assessed.

6. Comment on whether the incentives currently in place in the CGIAR are effective in encouraging scientists (CGIAR and partners) to engage in collective action for their research and fund raising activities.
7. Are there adequate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms in place to assess the performance of each SWEP? How can planning, monitoring and evaluation of SWEPS be improved in future?

In sum, the panel had to identify which instruments were working well but not judging each SWEP per se. This review was commissioned by the SC and jointly organized with the CGIAR Secretariat, particularly in relation to governance and management aspects of SWEPS. The Alliance of the CGIAR Centers Secretariat provided additional information regarding strategic, governance, financial and other key issues regarding CGIAR SWEPS. Four consultants (3 senior and a resource person) undertook the Review, working in virtual mode.

SC commentary on the Review Report

The panel had a complex task with a lot of heterogeneity among SWEPS. Given the limitations of time and resources the team has done an acceptable job in synthesizing the documentation available. However, the report does not show evidence of a careful analysis of what currently is working well and what may be not working well -- although there are some observations and elements of that in the report. In terms of addressing the main objectives, the Report has not provided clear, strategic recommendations about the SWEPS. The report does not address the issue of SWEPS as mechanisms to implement system priorities. The number of recommendations in the report itself makes it difficult to distil any essential lessons that could be used in considering the SWEP tool's merits for SP implementation. There is no attempt to understand or describe how SWEP might differ from a CP.

Thus the SC proposes a process (see below) that will use the report findings to address the specific items of the TOR that have not been adequately covered. The SC also makes the following **general comments about the Report**:

1. The report refers to the great differences among the SWEPS. In many cases, the most fundamental differences were between Systemwide Programs and Eco-regional Programs. However, there was no clear attempt to differentiate both types of programs in the review. An additional dimension to the discipline-based or eco-regional would be a coordinatory one.
2. The report makes a number of recommendations that in many ways seem to suggest that the best way forward is to make all SWEPS adhere to a single form of: organization, financing, linkages to NARS and a single type of research methodology. Clearly, there can't be one-size-fits-all model for all SWEPS.
3. The report recognizes the need to use SWEPS as a capacity building organization. This, in and of itself, is worth encouraging. However, the panel also suggested that the

websites and nature of communication within the network and between the network and the outside world in many cases were poor. Therefore, the SC agrees with the suggestion of the panel to use CG resources to build the capacity of SWEPS to build better websites and emphasize more the communications with the outside world.

4. The Panel identifies the key elements contributing to the "general success of SWEPS", but it's not clear how 'success' was evaluated for these. The Report gives no real sense of the success or otherwise of the SWEPS in achieving outputs rather than being simply long running programs. The report seems to shy away from saying anything negative about any SWEPS.

The panel has provided 25 recommendations. **The SC has the following comments in relation to some of these recommendations:**

Rec. 1: It is not clear how and why the Panel concluded that INRM was a main contributor to the success and component of all SWEPS. The analysis to conclude that integrated NRM as mentioned in the report is a success it's not clear.

Rec. 2: The SC cautions on the risk of transforming SWEPS into CPs based on opportunistic rather than on sound programmatic and structural reasons. It is curious that the panel in essence concurs with the de facto characterization of the DMP as a CP because of the manner in which the GEF imposed a governance structure as conditionality. This recommendation also needs to be clarified vis-à-vis recommendation 5 on the need for relations between CPs and SWEPS to ensure complementarity and subsidiarity.

Rec. 3: there is no a priori reason for merging SWEPS into CPs without discussing the time to outputs, the magnitude of the challenge and the likely role of outside partners. Challenge Programs are suggested to be time bounded (essentially two parts of five years aimed at clear deliverables).

Rec. 4: The issue of closure of SWEPS is dealt with specifically in relation to SWIM (which was closing anyway) but there is no discussion of longevity and closure of other SWEPS.

Rec. 13: Agree in principle but perhaps the Alliance of CGIAR Centers should assume more responsibility for establishing benchmarks for best practices and the associated M&E protocols?.

Rec. 14 Agree - i.e. no continuation without adequate funds, and set up funds required. There is little exploration of why some SWEPS which might have been very successful did not achieve better funding (such as the SLP) - are there other mitigating factors for this sort of Inter-Center approach? Are they necessarily disadvantaged versus Center proposals as the Report seems to imply?

Rec. 15 Agree that it makes sense to separate Center and SWEPS work to avoid confusion. But there is insufficient analysis.

Rec. 16: Agree in principle but the text accompanying this recommendation does not allow one to fully understand the rationale behind it. Is it implying that NARES membership of SWEPS are a constraint to the production of RPGs and GPGs?

Rec. 18: Agree in principle but more participation by stakeholders has transactions costs which need to be acknowledged.

Rec. 23: The principle seems good but where is the guarantee that an unsuccessful SWEP (from a funding point of view) will be any more successful when run only amongst national partners?

Rec. 24: related to continuous improvement of M&E processes - is not clear about what deficiencies in the current M&E processes (MTPs, CCERs, EPRMs, PMs, etc.) fail the SWEPS -needs more specificity to be useful.

Rec. 25 mentions results based management which is at the heart of the matter. Either a SWEP is a community of practice, backstopping CGIAR and or NARS efforts in a general way or it is geared as a research program to deliver certain results. The open-ended nature of SWEPS to date and the tendency with time to confuse these two goals (as well as the funding issue) may have led to the uncertain state of most current SWEPS.

Given the above comments, the SC has decided to use the report as an input for further SC work that would strengthen its analysis, building from the Panel recommendations the key ones that would best respond to the original TOR questions.

The SC with inputs from the Alliance will use the past experience of SWEPS to define a "profile" of what instruments do what well and categorize them into groups (coordinatory, discipline-based or eco-regional). Then, by examining the current MTPs as well as past external reviews it will assess how current SWEPS align with new SP; making recommendations on the best realignment approach. The SC will extract the nuggets from the past reviews that can contribute to best practice both in programs and in research management.

The SC will also provide a framework, again based on the generic findings from past reviews that can be used by the Alliance to outline the future directions of the current SWEPS, including in some cases their exit strategy. In doing so, the Council will assume that if a particular SWEP is contributing to SPs and there is a critical mass of researchers and has enough funding to make progress in pursuing its goals, the SWEP should be encouraged to keep what they are doing.

Also, it would explore additional ways for the CGIAR as a system to strengthen SWEPS, such as: support capacity building, provide seed funding in first years to build critical mass, implement several general rules of governance (election by members for site of convening center and encourage funding by dues: make members pay cost of administration, then, if it is not worth participating, the SWEP will naturally disappear).