

iSC Commentary on the Challenge Programme:

Improving Livelihoods and Natural Resources Management in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA): Securing the Future for Africa's Children

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

This commentary represents the views of the iSC following deliberations at iSC/TAC 85 at Berkeley, CA. and two weeks of subsequent discussion. The iSC has been informed by seven substantive reviews from internationally respected, highly qualified external reviewers selected for competence in disciplines central to the proposal, a thorough knowledge of research for development, and considerable experience in African agricultural research and development. They were divided among African scientists and those from developed countries. FARA presented the proposal at Berkeley. There were extensive comments and discussion in Berkeley among iSC members, three CGIAR Members, representative of CBC Chair, the CDC Chair, and DGs of two other Centres working in Africa. A statement was made by the Chairperson of the CDC Subcommittee on Sub Saharan Africa.

The criteria used in evaluating this and all previous CP proposals are presented in the detailed commentary which follows.

The proposal has many strong elements, including having basic goals in line with CGIAR priorities, a strong emphasis on participatory processes, wide stakeholder inclusiveness, and its consideration of the priorities of NEPAD and of the Sub Regional Organizations and of the many potential participants. The procedure used for building consensus has been extensive. The intended use of a competitive process for site and partner selection is in keeping with CGIAR intent for CPs. The proposed CP has potential for capacity building and for impact on both poverty and natural resources if it moves forward in an effective manner.

The process for CP formulation of this proposal was in a conceptual stage at the time of initial submission to the iSC. Procedures and management structures were described. The proposal does not specify any actual Pilot Learning Sites(PLSs), the partnerships for those sites, the identification of specific constraints to be addressed, the role of CGIAR Centres and the science to be used. The iSC considers that the nine sites proposed is too ambitious for early implementation, and the management structure is overly complex. Resource requirements are thus also very general. The iSC was therefore not able to clearly assess the proposal, as submitted, based on the specific criteria used in CP evaluation. As initially submitted, it could not be approved by iSC for moving forward with a recommendation for full funding in a single round of review. This was discussed with FARA on August 31.

Suggestions were made by the iSC for FARA to respond with a revised proposal. A phasing of the CP was suggested, with a limited number of PLSs for a first phase of the CP in the order of two to four sites. The proposal should provide an overview of the first sites of Phase I PLSs. For full implementation of the Phase I sites, the following have to be spelled out: where the sites will be located, who the site partners are, the specific problems to be addressed, what science is to be used, the role of CG Centres, and intended outcomes. A streamlined management structure for the overall CP and its Phase I would be outlined. Subsequent phases would be planned for future implementation.

FARA indicated in informal discussions with iSC members after the close of the formal iSC meetings on Sept 1 that it would submit a revised proposal adding an inception period of one year to bring three Pilot Learning Sites and their implementation partnerships to full definition for a phase I. The management structure would be streamlined, and a phase two would leave in place the full complement of nine sites. The Science Council would review these full implementation details, tentatively in mid 2004. No budget or further details were presented to iSC.

A revised draft of the proposal was received from FARA on September 5. It contains the changes that FARA had proposed in very general terms in the informal discussions. This new draft has been reviewed by the iSC through email and telephone discussions.

The proposed three sites for a phase I was in keeping with iSC's suggestion. The proposed full description of the three sites, the partnerships for their implementation, the "entry points", representing "best bet" priority impact options, and the proposed review and subsequent approval for full site funding and implementation are all appropriate. No further details on intended locations or site descriptions were provided. As FARA had explained verbally to the iSC in some detail, their "bottom up" design process which is a key part of the participatory approach of IAR4D has not yet gone to that detail through a process of concept notes and competitive bidding.

FARA has proposed a process and budget for year 1, the inception year, to be \$5, 202,000. This includes the selection of teams and design of pilot learning sites at a cost of \$566,000 per site plus oversight by FARA, and other activities such as methodology development and dissemination, capacity building, and information and knowledge management. No further details were provided as to who would carry out these activities, how or where they would be done. This budget for year one is the same under scenarios of three or nine sites for phase two. As additional sites are added in future years it assumes a similar cost per site. There are no further details presented for program for the other budget items beyond what is presented in the original proposal.

The iSC feels that the design process suggested is too cumbersome and costly. It combines many elements of project implementation. The iSC is still faced with the problem of approval of a significant investment without knowing what is to be done, where, and by whom, not only for the PLSs, but for a range of other activities. The iSC would very much like to see this CP move forward and eventually implemented. The general concepts, leadership from outside the CGIAR and many other elements have significant merit and potential. The proposal requires further work, with streamlining of a design process for the first set of three PLSs and some limited set of related activities. to bring their definition to a state where they can be approved for funding.

DETAILED COMMENTARY*

Note: headings and lead statements in bold are the criteria used by the iSC and its reviewers for assessment of this and all previous CP proposals

General comment: The external reviewers and the iSC were only able to review the proposal based on the general concepts that were presented and the extensive outlines of process. No specific details were provided on the specific institutions or individuals who were to carry out the work, the actual problems to be addressed, and the specifics of delivery and impact. All of these await further process within the AR4D framework. Many specifics were suggested in concept and position papers presented in volume II, but the selection process for these partners and ideas has not yet gone forward.

1. Relevance and Quality

1.1 Relevance of Expected Outputs

a) The proposed research programme aims at delivering outputs that very significantly enhance the objectives sought by the CGIAR, namely poverty reduction, food security, and sustainability of resource use.

The proposal has many strong elements, including having basic goals and intended outputs in line with CGIAR priorities, namely poverty alleviation and sustainable use of natural resources.

b) The proposal shows evidence of consistency with research priorities established by regional research organizations.

The four thematic areas selected for CP focus are consistent with priorities selected by NEPAD and with those of the Sub-Regional Organizations. Representatives of those organizations were a part of the extensive consultative process used in CP formulation (as presented in Volume III of the proposal), and were invited to present position papers and documents which are included in Volume II. Below the general level of NEPAD no priorities have yet been selected.

c) The expected results can uniquely be obtained through a Challenge Programme as opposed to the other CGIAR research channels, namely Systemwide Programmes and Center Core research.

The strengthening of African organizations for research leadership and the embedding of that research effectively in the development stream can be uniquely accomplished by a CP led by African organizations. Multiple and integrated results in the several resource “domains” can be obtained through a CP such as that proposed: Systemwide and Center Core research have great difficulty in assembling the broad range of needed stakeholders and giving them ownership. This uniqueness could be ensured by requiring projects to be peer-reviewed by local NARS and CGIAR Centers. This case was not fully made in the proposal.

d) The expected outputs are clearly defined and are achievable within the proposed time frame and budget.

It is not possible at this early stage to review in detail the planned outcomes and impacts, until the design process has moved forward with specification of sites and of partnerships for their management. In addition, many of the proposed CP activities require long-term

involvement (10-15 years): organizational change is very complex, and interventions may take much longer to yield tangible results, especially given the need for institutional strengthening among many of the stakeholders, the shortage of resources, and the turnover of trained scientists and development specialists. The inexperience in applying IAR4D principles will require a learning process as well. The INRM experience of many of the potential partners will greatly help.

1.2 Quality of Science and Qualifications of the Research Team

a) The research hypotheses are clearly specified in relation to the proposed challenge, and the proposed research methodology is directly relevant to the outputs sought.

The intended use of a geographical (ecozone) approach based on Pilot Learning Sites, with a “mix” of thematic activities relevant to the priorities of the respective sites as “entry points” or “best bet” options for impact, and the use of an integrated approach within sites are commendable. The “entry point” concept is critical to eventual impact. The concept of IAR4D appears to be sound, depending on how well the eventual Pilot Learning sites identify and integrate solutions to specific constraints in each of the resource “domains”.

While there is a general outline of thematic areas, a process defined for selection of sites and of partnerships for those sites, there is a lack of specificity as to: what constraints are to be addressed, what are the “best bet” options, the science to be used, by whom, and where it is to be done.

Many of the hypotheses sets, as spelled out in position papers by potential partners and presented in Volume II are excellent, and point to limiting factors for development as experienced by ongoing, high quality research experience. The selection process for these specific hypotheses has not yet gone forward, but is intended to take place in the competitive bidding process through concept notes and then full proposals.

The iSC considers the nine sites to be overly ambitious given the state of development of the lead partners. The phased implementation plan starting with three sites is an appropriate way forward. FARA and its stakeholders feel that a large number of sites is required for SSA-wide coverage. This will depend of the scale of each site, which, in turn, depends on the diversity of problems and of ecozones within sites. The iSC questions the need for SSA-wide coverage. This CP is but one instrument for African development. Its scale should evolve in a manner which optimizes scientific quality, impact and resource use efficiency.

b) The research is based on state of the art knowledge in the domain, and the proposal explicitly places itself relative to the most recent advances in the field;

The breadth and wealth of science, as so well represented among potential partners and evidenced in the position and concept papers of Volume II, are very impressive. However, until the design process moves forward with specification of sites and of partnerships for their management, it is not possible at this early stage to review in detail the appropriateness of science to be used. Questions on the inclusion of appropriate social science application to the solution of community-based problems in sustainable resource use, for instance, remain to be clarified.

c) The research itself is likely to lead to important advances in science and knowledge.

The proposed CP has good potential for capacity building and for impact on both poverty and natural resources. The research will lead to partnerships having a sharing of

responsibility for problem solving which will be essential for small countries with limited resources. The creation of institutional matrices having both specific and “virtual” dimensions has great promise.

The approaches for dealing with complex problem sets through identification of specific limiting factors (addressed through “entry points”) in the very difficult resource-limiting environment will represent “new” science. The programme matrix will present a framework for application of the latest science in germplasm improvement, in agroecology in information management and in application of the principles of resiliency.

d) The core parties in the programme are the best qualified in terms of research expertise and prior research achievements to carry on the research and deliver the benefits.

The experiences of the potential partners are very impressive. Several of them outline very relevant hypotheses for testing, and relate their considerable experience with “best bet” options. FARA is an appropriate lead organization.

FARA and the lead entities of the PLSs will need ongoing evolution and strengthening. A phased effort is essential to that growth. The CGIAR organization should provide ongoing assistance in research management through logframe application, management procedures and fiscal processes as it does for all CGIAR Centres once approval has been given and budget available for implementation..

1.3 Strategy for Utilizing and Applying Results

a) The research proposal is accompanied by an explicit plan for delivery, communication and dissemination of results and outputs, to maximize benefits to CGIAR stakeholders.

Delivery modes and their partnerships are outlined in very broad concept. A participatory approach is defined. There can be little specificity of delivery until the PLSs have been identified and their intended outputs specified. The CP activities are not tied to distinct research missions outlined by the champion institutions, which could guide the review of strategies for using the research results. That, in turn, must come as the partnerships are formed in the inception phase. The inception phase should lay out patterns of programme evolution for the three Phase I PLSs which can be followed for subsequent sites.

There is not a delineation of research and development interfaces. Some of the activities proposed seem to fall more into the development end of the continuum. The training of schoolchildren, for instance, is not only development, but of very long term impact. FARA must be careful to maintain comparative advantage in the research domain while it embeds the research into development through partnerships.

b) The research proposal addresses not only the fundamental scientific aspects but also the applied and adaptive stages of the research, in a realistic manner, and the uptake of research outputs in order to produce high impact outcomes.

The proposal does not provide information on the specific strategic, applied or adaptive research in the ‘hard’ sciences to be conducted: it does not take a realistic approach to producing technological outcomes that could substantially benefit poor people. Instead, it focuses on training and on developing a process to yield unspecified outcomes in the future.

1.4 Collaborative Arrangements and Beneficiaries’ Involvement in Research

a) The CP involves at least 2 CGIAR Centers and at least 2 NARS from the South. In addition other institutions from the North and South are slated to handle specific programme components or projects; CPs should involve the best institutions from the North and the South that can contribute to solving the problem. The institutions from the North should preferably bring their own resources to the consortium; and,

The role of the CGIAR Centers is not sufficiently spelled out, either in quality assurance and impact assessment, or in Centre participation in the PLSs. The intent of involvement, as evidenced by two seats on the Project Steering Committee, the comments of the proponents and broad involvement in the preparatory meetings seem appropriate, but the specifics of involvement await further CP development.

The embedding of the research within the proposed structure, management and partnerships for scaling up and out for widespread impact is commendable, and in keeping with the intent of the CP process for creative approaches and for leadership from institutions outside the present CGIAR system. However, the proposal does not specify partnerships for Pilot Learning Sites: a detailed review of the partnerships has to wait until the design process has moved forward with specification of sites and of partnerships for their management.

Also meriting credit is the strengthening of African institutions for greater coordination of SSA research efforts, both at a SSA scale and at the level of Sub Regional Organizations (SROs), is commendable.

The role of civil sector groups (NGOs, Community-based Organizations, etc.) is not spelled out. These groups were not well represented in the stakeholder process. FARA intends to address this issue. It is likely that these groups can be more effectively folded in at the PLS level.

b) The proposal gives clear evidence that consultations have been held with proposed research partners, in particular in the regions of relevance. The synergies, value added and mutual benefits among partners are clear.

The procedure used for building consensus has been extensive.

The broadly consultative process used for consensus-building and for formulating an integrative approach as well as the inclusion of a wide range of stakeholders receive high marks.

c) If competitive grants are to be used, procedures under which this would be done are clearly explained.

The research specificity, Pilot Learning Site and partnership selection are to be accomplished through a competitive process, carefully planned to bring inclusion of a range of partners, large and small. The plan for proceeding on a sub-regional basis for the three Phase I sites is appropriate to streamline the initial team-building. The concept note procedure to be followed by full proposals is appropriate. The iSC feels strongly that there is sufficient experience among potential partners, and sufficient priority setting by many partners has been done to enable them to immediately submit concept notes, and then full proposals for review and consideration for a limited set of PLSs and other activities.

FARA should make use of appropriate input from the CGIAR Science Council in the selection process.

d) Participatory research, use of beneficiaries' knowledge and experiences, and beneficiaries' interest in and ownership of the research subject are outlined and pursued by the CP starting with the planning stage.

The concept of decentralized responsibilities for pilot sites promises to lead to sub-regionally-focused projects that will address priority problems for those areas.

One of the proposal's strong elements is a strong emphasis on participatory processes, with wide stakeholder inclusiveness. The proponents point out the importance of process among stakeholders for building consensus and partnerships, envisioned to have impact well beyond this CP.

2. Governance and Budget

2.1 Governance and Management

a) Governance and management arrangements are defined explicitly in the joint venture agreement and in the Business Plan. They are flexible and adaptable to the specific needs of the CP and the structures are appropriate to the size and nature of the programme;

The iSC considers the management structure to be overly complex, particularly if a smaller number of sites is to be used in the initial Phase. The revised proposal moves in the right direction.

b) The CP is to be coordinated by an "independent" manager, operating on behalf of the core parties with clearly defined reporting responsibilities. The Coordinator is to be recruited from a core party or from outside and appointed for a fixed term under the terms and conditions of an agreed core party.

Providing flexibility and independence to the executing entity, especially the manager, to accommodate the requirements of host institutions, which should likewise reciprocate, is critical.

c) The arrangements for administrative support (to be provided by one of the core parties) are satisfactory. The Board of each core party is accountable for the input resources and delivery of agreed outputs of that core party; and,

FARA has been using fiscal services provided by ILRI as an interim procedure, and intends to continue this arrangement for the short term. This seems very appropriate. As management entities (lead organizations) are selected for the PLSs, institutional strengthening for them will be appropriate. The CGIAR in its several entities should stand ready to assist during the implementation phase.

d) There are clear lines of accountability and clear institutional arrangements spelling out roles, responsibilities, rules of operation, and conflict resolution in a formal agreement signed off at the appropriate legal level by each core party or CP associate party.

Building and fostering viable partnerships and organizational change are very complex. It is important for the CP Steering Committee to be brought quickly on line and other groups for selection of the concept notes and full proposals. When establishing PLTs, entrusting IARCs with administrative support for them could help set down clear lines of accountability. The proposal should take into account who will broker in situations of conflict over selection of Pilot Learning Sites.

It will take time for strengthening of the Boards and Governing Councils/Steering Committees for handling this level of research. Such strengthening is a major long term goal of this CP.

e) There are clear and satisfactory arrangements for handling legal responsibilities and there is full adherence to the CGIAR's IPR policy.

The legal arrangements for FARA and its partnership[s] must evolve during the inception Stage. The proposal does not cover conformity with CGIAR's IPR policy. There is full intent by FARA to conform to concepts of international public goods, but the policies will have to evolve as problem sets and their technological and scientific application are identified.

2.2 Performance Evaluation and Impact Analysis

a) Internal peer review mechanisms for quality and relevance and for performance evaluation are present and sound; and,

A small Scientific Sub-committee of the large and complex Programme Steering Committee would oversee CP's employing the best science in a coherent manner. External Peer Review Panels, carefully selected to address specific issues, will aid the Sub-Committee. However, the *ad hoc* manner of creation and operation of Panels calls into question their ability to evaluate in a uniform manner.

b) Procedures are in place for the continuing monitoring of progress and adjustments of the programme (as needed) in the course of implementation.

Performance evaluation and impact analysis plans are developed only at an indicative level. Impact Assessment specifications have a negligible livelihoods focus: technology adoption is used as a proxy for livelihood betterment.

c) Indicators are identified and benchmark information is available to measure project impact.

Even though it is important to set milestones for deliverable products, there is little recognition of experimentation and learning, which, in activities involving ecological change, may take longer than expected. Feedback based on such experimentation and learning, in addition to conventional evaluation methods, might reduce risk-taking on the part of managers.

d) The CP proposal should include an internal time-bound work plan on the project's progress, specifying stages and milestones, with intermediary deliverable products subject to independent peer reviews.

An indicative time schedule for implementing proposed programmes and competitive grants scheme is included. The revised stepwise implementation is appropriate. The inception phase will bring on line the first three PLSs, but sets the groundwork for a much larger number of PLSs. A critical decision point will be reached in mid to late 2004 when not only the first three PLSs are slated for approval and full implementation, but subsequent rounds of proposals and addition PLSs are planned.

2.3 Budget and Finance

a) The business plan outlines a strategy to mobilize new resources (in cash and in kind), considering equity in the relation between benefits and costs of the programme, and the need to balance contributions between North and South; and,

Apparently, FARA would be responsible for mobilizing new resources, but how they would do this and who within FARA would take charge are unclear. More emphasis is required on leveraging additional contributions through a mission-oriented strategy. Question of transparency and traceability of funds remains a concern to donors: they prefer restricted financing of prioritized projects, where they manage the financing themselves through external technical advisors.

Partners should be encouraged to leverage core money, particularly for those partners and activities which are more clearly development-focused.

The iSC considers it to be poor strategy to use a costly program definition process and to engage in strengthening of partners before the specific program targets and approaches are in place. This creates an atmosphere of plentiful resources and lack of urgency in delivering outputs. The strengthening and backstopping should be done within the context of ongoing work, with a “get the job done” attitude.

b) The proposed budget and its allocation are appropriate.

Resource requirements are very preliminary and approximate; the proposed budget is overly ambitious, at least for initial implementation. A detailed review of the appropriateness of budgets has to await a progression of the design process to specification of sites and of partnerships for their management. Budget is lop-sided toward administration/ management with only a small portion toward actual research agenda.

The breadth of activities and their cost before problems have been identified and concrete proposals approved is excessive.

c) Preliminary contacts confirm that there is sufficient donor willingness to commit funding for the first 2-3 years of the programme.

The extent of donor willingness to contribute to the CP is unclear. Of concern is the high proportion of the project devoted to administrative functions (workshops, meetings) and very little on actual research, which may not be attractive to potential donors.