

**Science Council of the CGIAR**  
**Commentary on the external review of the SSA CP Inception Phase**  
**September 25, 2006**

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**Summary**

The SC thanks the External Review Panel for a comprehensive and clear report.<sup>1</sup> The basic findings of the Panel is that while the CP has not met the main milestones set for the Inception Phase, there is evidence of progress towards the milestones to support an extension in order to address the original research question of the CP, i.e. the testing of the benefits of an innovative platform—the IAR4D concept—in designing and implementing research at the interface of productivity, environment, policy and markets that would increase demonstrably the delivery of the benefits to the end users. Thus, the Panel recommended an extension of the CP for 3 years. It does, however, add a number of conditions, one of which is to remain focused at three sites, and that the program strengthens the research planning and design and implements a process to ensure systematic monitoring and evaluation to develop IPGs.

*The SC agrees with the basic findings of the Panel. The SC adds some additional conditions to the Panel recommendations which are explained in detail below.*

**Background**

The CP has completed an 18 month Inception Phase recommended by the SC in 2004. In the SC letter to the CGIAR in 2004, the SC noted that there was insufficient information about the research plans of the CP to make an informed judgement on the relevance and quality of the science. The SC recommended an Inception Phase of 18 months in order for the CP to: (i) develop the appropriate institutional arrangements; and (ii) begin substantive research on the “challenge” of the CP (i.e., the testing of the benefits of an innovative platform - the IAR4D concept - in designing and implementing research at the interface of productivity, environment, policy and markets that would increase demonstrably the delivery of the benefits to the end users. The SC proposed that the progress in the inception phase could be measured in terms of the new research priorities (based on the IAR4D approach) with appropriate expected outputs and means of measurement and the institutional arrangements (e.g., institutional innovations) needed to implement the main research phase of the CP.

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<sup>1</sup> The SC apologises for the poor video and telephone links during the 6<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Council which prevented a clear discussion among the Chair of the Panel, the SC and FARA. However, in addition to the telephone connection with the Executive Secretary of FARA and the Coordinator of the CP, the SC was able to interact with one panel member and had access to the presentation of the Executive Secretary of FARA.

The Panel was asked to review the CP at the end of the Inception Phase based on: (i) the progress made in the design of research and feasibility of conducting the research at the proposed sites; (ii) the knowledge gained for the institutional learning; and (iii) assessing the 'added value' from the new research approach to the design and implementation of IAR4D agenda.

### **Overall achievements of the milestones for the inception phase**

In terms of meeting the milestones for the Inception Phase, the panel concluded that the CP had "put together an elaborate institutional structure and encouraged partners who often do not work together to enthusiastically embrace the new paradigm (IAR4D) and desire to collaborate on 'business unusual' to achieve sustainable agriculture development in Africa." However the Panel noted the challenge remains to: (i) define a coherent research plan and establish program priorities; (ii) build strong support and participation by stakeholders; and (iii) develop the project proposal at the site level from which would emerge the proof of the IAR4D concept.

*The SC notes from the Panel report that while there has been progress in establishing the partnership for the IAR4D, this in itself does not constitute an important outcome. More importantly, the Council believes that to date there still is not a coherent "research plan".<sup>2</sup> The Council agrees with the panel report that there is yet no systematic implementation of the projects at the site level (PLS projects) and no monitoring to measure the outcome from the new approach. In other words the CP has not yet met the milestones set out at the beginning of the Inception Phase. In supporting the Panel recommendation to move to a research phase, the SC notes that it is critical that the CP has a research plan in place and that such a plan be included in the first MTP of the research phase (June 2007)*

The Panel reports that sufficient progress has been made in some aspects such that the CP needs to continue for 3 more years in order to rigorously measure the benefits of the new IAR4D approach (the proof of concept). In the SC discussion there was a view that the initial time frame of 18 months was overly ambitious given the complexity of partners and the difficulties of communication of the new approach to all stakeholders. The panel's view is that adequate structures are now in place at three (3) sites to provide the research analysis described above.

*The SC believes that in defining research hypotheses it is imperative to develop a research design that can allow the research program to identify the effects of the different components of the IAR4D approach and do so in a scientific, statistically-*

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<sup>2</sup> Defined to include: (i) a precise statement of the research problem; (ii) specific objectives and testable hypotheses; (iii) specific methods that will contribute to progress towards each specific objective; and (iv) a defined set of outputs showing progress towards the objective that are measurable and able to be evaluated.

*based manner. The SC believes this to be important research about the 'challenge' of the CP (which from now on is a time period defined as the "Research Phase"). The SC acknowledges that although still far from complete, there has been progress toward the research objectives. Therefore, the SC agrees with the panel on the benefits of continuation and recommends the Research Phase to last until December 2009.*

**What would be achieved in a continuation?**

The Panel has recommended that the CP focus on the research question—does the IAR4D concept work and can it generate deliverable IPGs/RPGs for the end users?

*The SC agrees with the Panel recommended focus and adds a further clarification to the main research question: Does the IAR4D framework deliver more benefits to the end user than conventional approaches (had the conventional R&D and extension approach had access to the same resources)? And, how sustainable and usable is the approach outside the test environment (i.e. issues of scaling out for broader impact)?*

**What is the scope of the research? What can the 'innovation' do and how to monitor progress and measure benefits?**

The Panel noted that among the IAR4D practitioners (and CP team members) there is some confusion on what is meant by the focus of the CGIAR research on IPGs around the CGIAR system priorities (SP).<sup>3</sup> The SC suggests that the main IPG of the SSA CP is the innovation platform for use across a wide range of conditions in Africa. In addition the properly targeted research on the interface of the processes driving productivity gains, efficient use of resources, the care of the environment and the policies and the markets to contribute IPGs through technical and policy options.

*Thus, the SC fully endorses the recommendation by the Panel to focus research on these important IPGs. The SC also fully endorses the panel's recommendation that the CP seek the missing expertise from outside sources, particularly ARIs.*

The robustness of the IPGs will depend on the sampling across a transect in the Research Phase. The Panel has strongly recommended that the CP focus on three (3) sites that have been chosen to transect both ecosystems and institutional arrangements. The panel believes that any expansion at this stage is: (i) unlikely to improve the robustness of the

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<sup>3</sup> From this the SC assumes that not all members are conversant with the hallmarks of a CP and with the System Priorities of the CGIAR. Briefly put a CP addresses a complex 'challenge' that will have a large impact on the CGIAR goals when focused on one or more of the CGIAR SPs; is time bound; engages a number of partners; and captures research from alternate suppliers to generate new knowledge with potential for wide applications. A requirement for the IPG nature of the research is it must have use and be robust across borders and across a wide range of conditions.

research findings; and (ii) likely to dilute the research effort and jeopardise meeting the time frames above.

*The SC agrees with the Panel on the importance on staying focused on the research agenda. The SC also recognizes how difficult it has been to create the institutional partnerships and to do the baseline work in the 3 sites that were included in the Inception Phase. In order to not diffuse the focus in the Research Phase and in order not to be faced with the costs in time and financial resources that would be required to invest with additional partnership building and related activities during the Research Phase (should the project expand to new sites), the SC believes that 3 sites are adequate to meet the research objectives.*

The panel highlights that a critical component of this research agenda is the monitoring and measurement of outputs, outcomes and impact. Further because of the nature of the research, traditional M&E profiles might not be adequate. Also, it is the SC's view that the 'participatory feedback and reflection approaches' that are important tools in the research design for innovation systems are of themselves unable to measure the real outcome of the approach.

*The SC therefore endorses the panel view on the need to seek outside expertise in developing the appropriate evaluation approaches (along with indicators to provide evidence for proof of concept) and in setting up the experimental "counter factual" needed to test the research hypothesis of the IAR4D approach. Specifically, the SC believes it is necessary that the research design is set up to be able to identify the effects of the institutional innovations (and its separate components) and to not confound the impacts of IAR4D with those of the effects of the financing. Further, the SC would like to see in detail the part of the research plan that addresses these evaluation concerns by having them explicitly addressed in the first MTP (June 2007).<sup>4</sup>*

The Panel highlights the importance of capacity building at many levels in order to undertake the research about the innovation platform.

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<sup>4</sup> In considering the type of expertise that is needed, the Council recognizes the Program's research is without question challenging. As such, and in the spirit of the CP, FARA is encouraged to draw on the world's best experts in natural and social sciences. In particular, the fields of development economics and other social sciences have recently experienced a new wave of innovations in "evaluation" methodologies and research designs. New evaluation research designs and statistical methodologies would be helpful in assisting the CP test hypotheses and ultimately establish proof of concept. The methods are fully capable of being implemented in the field sites that have already been chosen, but plans need to be made at the very beginning of the research in order to take full advantage of the new evaluation approaches (since at times it will affect the design of the technical parts of the research).

*The SC agrees with this recommendation; it notes that this is a novel research program addressing a complex challenge and with the large number of players of different backgrounds, experiences and agendas, the CP requires investment in capacity to ensure success. At this stage of the research, this investment in capacity is another reason for not adding additional sites.*

**What makes the CP unique? What would be its exit and replication strategy?**

The panel has noted that the CP must identify its comparative advantage and strategic role in relation to other players in agriculture R&D. This will lead to a clear formulation of activities that **add value**. The Panel believes that 'business success' for the CP can be achieved through the focus on the productivity, natural resources, policy, and markets and in a nimble innovative platform that can respond quickly to opportunities.

*The SC endorses this view.*

The Panel has recommended that after 3 years a review of the CP is conducted to see if the IAR4D works and whether the CP merits continued endorsement. The Panel envisages that if the concept works, the approach can be replicated at many more sites. And for this the CP needs to design an exit strategy and a resourcing plan.

*The SC agrees with this in part. The SC has recommended that the research phase ends by December 2009 with an answer (yes or no) to the question: does the new IAR4D concept improve delivery and have an impact? If the outcome to this challenge is positive, others more directly involved in development could scale out the results.*