

Plan to Evidence Portfolio Impacts (PEPI)

SPIA Response to the draft of 3 October 2026

Cover note

SPIA welcomes the opportunity to comment on the latest draft of the Plan to Evidence Portfolio Impacts (PEPI), shared on 3 October 2026. This response brings together written comments from members of the SPIA Panel, points raised in discussions with the MELIAF impact assessment community of practice (IA COP), and SPIA's own internal review. It sets out SPIA's broad concerns, followed by specific comments on the draft.

The 3 October draft differs substantially from the earlier version on which SPIA provided formal feedback. SPIA agrees with the assessment of IA COP researchers who note that each iteration of the plan has raised new substantive issues. Reliance on AI is just one potential explanation for the prevalent concern that these iterations have not led to convergence and consensus. Our comments below nonetheless address the 3 October draft on its own terms.

Additionally, SPIA remains concerned about the treatment of null and negative findings within this plan, a point also raised in the earlier feedback. Not every CGIAR innovation will succeed, and learning what does not work is as important as understanding what does. Combined with the weight given to the investment case among the plan's stated purposes, PEPI risks giving the impression of an institutional exercise in "success making".

Overarching concerns

1. Definitional issues persist

The terms "big wins", "best bets", "reach", and "impact at scale", among others, need to be clearly defined. The draft itself acknowledges that the term "impact at scale" is loosely defined at the moment (page 5). The plan adopts plausible contribution, not attribution, as the standard of evidence, yet proposes to add up effects across studies and give them a monetary value. The plan should clarify how these fit together, and whether any claim of attribution is intended.

2. The methodological approach is unclear

It is not clear how monitoring and evaluation, impact assessment and foresight data will feed into the three linked priority questions (Table 6, page 13). There are not yet rules on which studies count, how findings will be aggregated, or how conflicting findings will be handled. The list of deliverables is ambitious and repeated throughout the document, but there is little substantive discussion of the methods by which it will be achieved. It is also unclear how the three questions fit together, for example, whether adoption and impact evidence gathered under Question 1 could also be used to estimate returns on investment under Question 3; or why contributions to system transformation (Question 2) are different from progress towards impact area targets (Question 1).

3. Resolving interdependencies

The plan relies on elements that are not yet in place: an agreed typology of study types, quality standards, and contributions from Centres, Programs and Accelerators. These are substantive outstanding issues, and it is not clear how realistic the plan is without them being resolved.

4. The working arrangement with SPIA is yet to be defined

PEPI's section 4.6 (page 16) states that a "working arrangement was discussed with SPIA". SPIA understands that this reflects the PEPI team's intended involvement of SPIA rather than an agreed arrangement and asks that the text be clarified. SPIA is an independent advisory body that can advise but not implement. SPIA contributions will need to be discussed and agreed upon accordingly, given its mandate and bandwidth.

Specific comments

Summary and decisions requested (page 1)

- The summary states that the plan will be delivered primarily by coordinating work CGIAR already does, while committing to aggregate estimates, projections and a collection of return-on-investment studies. This assumes that the work needed for ROI estimates is already in place. However, impact assessment work has been scaled back, and the lack of cost data was a significant issue in SPIA's recent ROI exercise.
- Decision D2 asks that contributing studies, data and evidence become an institutional expectation of Centres, Programs and Accelerators. It is not clear that they have the budget to do this. IA COP members have repeatedly raised this issue considering current budgetary realities and the outlook for the coming years.

Section 1: Purpose and scope (pages 3-5)

- **Purpose (Section 1.1).** The two stated purposes (the investment case and learning about which lines of work are most effective) risk implying that the plan is not interested in learning what does not work.
- **Definitions.** Given that plausible contribution, not sole attribution, is the standard claimed, it would be good to clarify whether the plan intends any attribution of impact to CGIAR.

Section 2: How the plan works (pages 5-7)

- **Question 1 (Table 2).** Read together with later sections, Question 1 suggests monitoring progress on SDG-level targets and then claiming some CGIAR contribution towards them. Is this the intended message?
- **Question 3 (Table 2).** The description of Question 3 does not appear to answer the question. Also, it is not clear how the plan can deliver on this question if the funding to do so is not available.
- **Delivery process (Figure 2).** The figure states that most key studies will be conducted by Centre staff and some by SPIA. It is not clear that this can realistically be committed to within the existing budget for causal impact studies.
- **Deliverables (Section 2.5).** There is no substantive discussion of how each will be achieved or what methods will be used.

Section 3: Unpacking the three portfolio questions (pages 7–13)

- **Question 1 (Figure 3).** Scaling findings up without breaking causality is an important concern, but the orange-fleshed sweet potato (OFSP) example raised in SPIA's earlier feedback

documents a wider range of concerns about this. Projections can be wrong in more ways than overstating impact at the beneficiary level, for instance, by overstating how many people actually adopt a technology. It is also unclear how this approach measures magnitude if the outcomes in question are SDG-level targets.

- **Question 3 key concern (Figure 3; Table 5).** Cost data is an important constraint, but not the only one. The presence of rigorous impact assessments is also critical.
- **Best-bet topics (Section 3.1).** A set of criteria or priorities for identifying best-bet topics should be defined. Without them, there is a risk that a wide range of approaches will be used without coherent and compelling criteria.
- **Question 2 (Section 3.2).** The rationale for treating Question 2 differently from Question 1 should be clarified. The approaches proposed for Question 1 could also apply here.
- **How the questions fit together (Section 3.2–3.3).** The three questions appear related but distinct: monitoring and impact across Impact Areas in Question 1, system transformation in Question 2, and returns in Question 3. The plan should explain how and whether these fit together.
- **Evidence types (Section 3.4, Table 6).** The term "impact assessment" may not fit Question 3 as described. The plan should clarify whether results from impact assessments under Question 1 would be applied to Question 3. It should also clarify whether process tracing is considered to measure "impact" in qualitative work.

Section 4: Operating the plan (pages 13–17)

- **Terminology, standards and methods (Section 4.4, Table 7).** These are critical outstanding issues that need to be settled, and it is not clear how realistic the plan is while they remain unresolved. Many actors are described, but it is not clear who is ultimately responsible for leading these efforts.
 - The plan also names a range of qualitative and mixed-method approaches, including process tracing, contribution analysis, realist evaluation, and case studies. The typology and standards to be agreed upon should explicitly cover these approaches, with criteria suited to them (such as transparent case and participant selection, clearly described data sources and analysis, triangulation, and, for studies making causal claims, assessment of rival explanations). This would allow qualitative evidence to be screened and compiled as transparently as quantitative evidence.
- **What the plan asks of Centres, Programs and Accelerators (Section 4.5).** It is not clear what the consequences are if the minimum contribution is not made, or whether this is a credible ask.
- **Working with SPIA (Section 4.6).** See overarching concern 4. The details of the working arrangement described here have not been agreed with SPIA, and the list of contributions that follows is ambitious. SPIA serves primarily as an advisory body, as the draft itself notes later in Table 10.
- **Use of AI (Section 4.7).** AI tools will only be as useful as the inputs going into them. Without the resources to produce high-quality impact assessments and cost estimates, the outputs will not be of high quality. AI can be a helpful tool and should be used accordingly, but only to the extent that it solves a problem it can realistically address.

Section 7: Governance, adaptive management and risks (pages 20–21)

- **Risk register (Table 11), "Risk of unwelcome findings suppressed or softened".** As drafted, the response appears to still allow null results to be held back, and does not address iterative learning from negative results. This remains a major concern.