

Summary Report

Evaluation of Partnerships in CGIAR

OCTOBER 2017

Anni McLeod (Team Leader)

Julio Berdegúe

Paul Teng

Sophie Zimm (IEA)



Independent
Evaluation
Arrangement

This evaluation has been commissioned by the Independent Evaluation Arrangement (IEA) of CGIAR.

The Independent Evaluation Arrangement (IEA) of CGIAR encourages fair use of this material provided proper citation is made.

Correct citation: CGIAR - IEA (2017), Evaluation of Partnerships in CGIAR. Summary Report. Rome, Italy: Independent Evaluation Arrangement (IEA) of CGIAR <http://iea.cgiar.org>

Introduction

CGIAR has a long history of working in partnership, notably with international and national research organizations. The importance of partnerships in modern science and for solving complex development problems was emphasized in CGIAR's reforms of 2001 and 2008. CGIAR recognized the evolving architecture in agriculture research, including specialised capacity in other research institutions, growing strength of National Agricultural Research Systems in emerging economies, and increasing role of the private sector. The 2008 reform centred on the implementation of research through large, multi-partner programs, the CGIAR Research Programs (CRP). Partnerships among Centers and with external organizations were considered essential for CGIAR to achieve its objectives as defined in the Strategy and Results Framework.

This evaluation, organized by the Independent Evaluation Arrangement, represents a first comprehensive assessment of CGIAR's engagement in partnerships. The evaluation's purpose was to assess the extent to which the 2008 reform has been successful in strengthening partnerships and thereby advancing the achievement of CGIAR goals. The focus was on partnerships for implementation of CGIAR's research agenda, with emphasis on external partnerships and the programmatic (Center and CRP) level. The role of each part of the System in partnerships was considered, as well as the relationships between System and Center level.

The following definition of partnership was used: "*a recognized relationship between a CGIAR Center or CRP and another institution within or external to CGIAR, to jointly undertake activities that contribute to each institution's mandate*". The three key evaluation questions addressed the strategic selection of partnerships, the enabling environment for partnerships, and the effectiveness of partnerships. Evaluation evidence consisted of extensive review of documents, 147 interviews with a broad range of stakeholders, an electronic survey of CRP Flagship Project leaders, analysis of Center and CRP landscape of partnerships considered critical for their operations, and six case studies illustrative of specific types of partnership.

Main conclusions and findings

Since early 2000, partners have been seen increasingly as essential for complementing CGIAR's competence in fast evolving areas of science and for taking on CGIAR's research outputs for scaling and generating impact on development goals. CGIAR's 2008 reform marks a major milestone and has been influential at two levels; it has steered the System and its Centers towards greater collaboration and coordination in CRPs, and it has stimulated greater attention to the strategic role of partnerships along the impact pathways. The reform has also led to greater involvement of partners in consultation about the strategic framework and program content, and in conduct of research. While this has largely resulted from the CRPs' outcome orientation and need to be explicit about their geographic and country focus, it has also resulted from Centers' deliberate attempts to form strong partnerships with their collaborators.

While CGIAR has emphasised public-private partnerships in discussions, the System lacks agreement and strategy for engaging optimally with the private sector for enhancement of science and delivery, in particular. Strategic direction is also lacking for scaling of research, both in terms of the extent of CGIAR's direct involvement in delivery of technology, and the support needed for national partners to take over delivery and scaling effectively. The System governing bodies have a central responsibility to lead these discussions and provide the strategic guidance.

Funding to support partnerships and partners' work also requires attention. The trend of diminishing core-type funding has not been reversed. Consequently CRPs have had a narrow margin to experiment with new, innovative partnerships. Fund-sharing between Centers and external partners has limited.

Uncertainties associated with funding represent a major constraint to partnering and hence to the delivery of CGIAR's objectives. Mechanisms are needed to reduce the unpredictability of core funding. In addition, because CGIAR budget cannot be expected to fund all aspects of partnerships and scaling of results, attention is needed by CGIAR and its partners to increase co-funding of activities and investments in agricultural research and development in the recipient countries.

In the most effective CGIAR partnerships each partner works to its comparative advantage. CGIAR research leaders and external partners weigh up the transactions costs of establishing partnerships against perceived or actual benefits. CGIAR's comparative advantage lies in a combination of two factors: presence in and knowledge of the many countries where it works and has institutional links and a solid scientific reputation. With capacities and interest evolving fast, CGIAR and its partners need to continuously reflect on their respective comparative advantage. Centers must maintain scientific expertise in core areas, and they must collaborate with organizations that have strong capacity for scaling and their own sources of funding.

Strategic selection of partnerships

While geographic location, funding and political reasons somewhat restrict CGIAR's freedom in its engagement in partnerships, Centers, and consequently CRPs, have been increasingly strategic in selecting partners. Centers have built on a long history of working with partners adding new partnerships according to need. CRPs have been influential in both increasing Centers' collaboration within the programs and positioning of external partnerships along the impact pathway.

Explicit partnership strategies exist to variable extent. Few documents amount to a comprehensive partnership strategy, defined by the evaluation as a) clearly demonstrating an analysis of the partnership needs of the program based on the program objectives and Theory of Change, and b) suggesting a targeted approach to identifying and working with partners and partnership models to meet these needs. CRP proposals were requested to include information on partnerships, and the strategic content on partnerships improved from CRP I to CRP II. Some CRPs have further developed partnership strategies or principles and several Centers have also prepared partnership strategies. All strategies reflected an intention to broaden the partner base, working with new partners while maintaining existing strong relationships. The evaluation considers it useful to document partnership strategies, because the process requires CGIAR research managers to communicate with each other and make their thinking explicit for external partners and donors. Attention should be given to approaches to engage with specific types of partner, such as private sector, and partnership models (structure and institutional arrangements) to match with particular needs.

Partnerships along the impact pathway. An analysis of the partnership "landscape" through a sample of CRPs' Centers' critical partnerships showed deliberate positioning of partners along the CRPs' impact pathways, and a broad range of external partnerships, including new or differently constructed ones with advanced research institutes that bring strong research capacity. Over 80 percent of the partnerships were reported as contributing in more than one part of the impact pathway. While many long-term partnerships have continued, more than half of the critical partnerships have been established during the CRP period, including new engagement in different kinds of partnerships for scaling and a deliberate effort to involve more non-governmental organizations. These trends are positive and respond well to the reform expectations. It is important for the CRPs to maintain the degree of autonomy they have had and sufficient flexibility to innovate with partnerships to serve program needs.

Partnerships with the private sector. In the reform, CGIAR recognized that it had to adapt to the changes in agricultural science and technology, where the private sector was rapidly becoming a major contributor to research and development. Partnership offers potential benefits to both sides; CGIAR has global reach

and a mandate to work on poverty, while private companies have knowledge of and access to markets for technology, and in some cases also have specialized expertise and technology for research. There has been progress, and partnerships with the private sector have increased since the CRPs began although engagement particularly with the large multinationals has been slow in most Centers. Differences in public and private interests, and the need to build expertise in Intellectual Property Rights and carry out risk assessments and due diligence, were identified as factors that had slowed progress. Despite continuous dialogue about public-private partnerships in CGIAR, the System has not yet formulated a position or strategy for them, which would leverage its advantage as a public sector partner. While private sector engagements involve agreements that are best dealt with at Center level, further strategic action at the System level, beyond the policy on intellectual assets, is much needed.

Multi-stakeholder platforms. Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSP) are a specific form of partnership involving alliances of diverse stakeholders, often with broad objectives for knowledge sharing and action and hence important for delivery of outcomes and impact. Over the past two decades there has been a rapid growth in CGIAR's involvement particularly in two kinds of MSPs: locally-based innovation platforms and global MSPs set up to address complex problems. During the reform period, there has been a shift from engagement mainly with MSPs with a delivery focus on agricultural innovations (still the largest group of MSPs) to MSPs with a national system focus and, most recently, those that have a research focus or deal with global challenges. However, the strategic purpose of CGIAR's engagement with MSPs dealing with global challenges was not clear, beyond simply having a presence. Participation in global MSPs will likely continue to grow, which is justified for CGIAR to fulfil its mandate. However CGIAR must be strategic in selecting where and how it can best contribute.

Enabling environment

Partnership management. System-level structures and systems put in place for implementing the reform changes have also concerned partnerships. CRPs have been requested to demonstrate involvement of partners in program design, report on partnership achievements and, most recently, begin coordinating their activities at selected geographic sites together with partners. At operational level the requirements, particularly for reporting and accountability were seen as heavy, particularly by partners who have participated in program management. It is a concern that relatively little has been done for incentivizing or providing guidance for external partnerships.

Centers, particularly those leading CRPs, provide the day-to-day support to partnerships in CRPs. Working relationships between CRP leaders and Center partnership managers have generally been good. Risk management in particular has benefitted from due diligence processes put in place since the reform. The evaluation found deliberate involvement of non-CGIAR partners in CRP management very positive and appreciated by the partners themselves. However, given the capacity and resources that several national partners in emerging economies now have and given their important role for generating impact, there is scope to include more partners from developing countries in a management role in CRPs.

In CRP planning and reporting documents, partnerships are not well integrated to presentation about the research content, which makes both management and monitoring of the value and performance of partnerships difficult. Partnerships should be seen and presented in relation to the CRP's Theories of Change in order to reconfirm their critical role and address challenges for their success.

Funding. The funding situation has generated a great deal of dissatisfaction and tension. Core funding through Windows 1 and 2, which was expected to provide a solid funding base underpinning research programs and strategic engagement in partnerships, has not materialized at the level expected. Although the research carried out in partnership does not depend much on core funding, the low level, annual nature, unreliability and late delivery of core funding have been damaging to partnerships. These

trends have negatively affected competitive schemes, multi-year planning and experimenting on new partnerships, for which bilateral funding has seldom been available. Consequently, they have affected progress of research activities and also CGIAR's delivery on its own commitments, thereby affecting the Centers' reputation for reliability.

Experience from competitive grants has been good. These schemes have been used by several CRPs to manage programmatic integration by funding collaborative research of strategic importance to the CRP. These schemes cannot be maintained without core funding.

With core funding diminishing, bilateral funding is increasingly sought. It underpins much of the work done with partners, and in this respect an increase in the bilateral budget is positive for partnerships, despite less flexibility attached to this type of funding. However, the shift in funding has created some tension between the objectives of research of global relevance requiring long-term and continuing investments, and the delivery and impact objective typical to bilateral funding, that tends to push CGIAR into the development realm. There are also opportunities from an increased bilateral budget, such as potential to partner more with private sector partners that bring their own funding and are motivated by market potential; the opportunity to re-examine financing models with traditional partners; and the potential for emerging economy donors to have a stronger role in co-financing research and scaling activities. Yet, there needs to be good analysis and innovative thinking on how bilateral funding can better serve strategic partnering and how co-financing of research and development by recipient country governments, private sector and others could be stimulated and harnessed for supporting CGIAR's objectives.

Guidance and administrative support from CGIAR System level. The Fund Council, which had considerable positional power to provide oversight and guidance on external partnerships, has discussed many issues relating to partnerships. Apart from its major focus on building effective partnerships within CRPs, and general engagement of stakeholders, it has focused particularly on engagement with the private sector and delivery of benefits, which requires engagement with delivery partners. However, it has not followed up on those discussions by tasking any groups to generate further information or develop strategies or guidelines (the intellectual assets policy being the only concrete action for benefitting partnerships). Among the donors, there is a divergence of views, particularly concerning two important and connected aspects – funding and expectation of impact, which has led to the Centers and CRPs receiving mixed messages.

Organizational learning. Partnership is a cross-cutting issue affecting all Centers and CRPs, and as such could be expected to benefit from organizational learning across the CGIAR system. However, learning has mostly occurred at the level of individuals and in small working groups. The ISPC's biannual Science Forum has catered for science discussions among CGIAR and other research communities. These events represent one opportunity to different research communities to engage and reflect although there is no evidence of new concrete partnerships having been formed. System-wide organizational reflection and learning about partnerships is clearly lacking. The System could do more to take advantage of existing arrangements and events to provide opportunities for reflection on partnership strategy and management. The ISPC could engage, for example, in conducting strategic reviews of selected partnership topics. Its recent work on MSPs deserves more attention and follow-up.

Stakeholder engagement at System level. GCARD was the main mechanism in the reformed CGIAR to facilitate consultation between CGIAR and its stakeholders, stakeholders' engagement in setting CGIAR agenda and priorities and inputs in CGIAR decision-making, and enhancement of partnerships. The three successive GCARDs have provided opportunities for CGIAR scientists to interact with existing and potential external partners, and they have given external partners a forum to voice their views on international agricultural research, CGIAR's strategic frameworks and portfolio development. However, the evaluation

found no evidence that GCARD's consultations had impacted on CGIAR program design, that participation in GCARD has increased the connection of grass-root organizations with CGIAR research, or that GCARD had been the source of new partnerships or resulted in stronger relationships with existing partners.

Partnerships in action

Internal partnerships. Closer partnerships among Centers can be directly attributed to the reform; research managers value these relationships forged in the CRPs. Integration still varies across CRPs, progress is clear, particularly moving to phase 2. Cross-Center collaboration clearest in genebank management in the current Genebank Platform. Regarding joint outputs, the evaluation did not find evidence of increase in joint publishing in peer-reviewed journals, but sharing of resources was noticed in the crop CRPs. When approaching donors and national partners, Centers still tend to act unilaterally. The initiative of country collaboration could offer an opportunity for more coordinated action by Centers.

External partnerships. During the reform partners have become more involved in consultation, planning and management of research, including development of CRP proposals and program Theories of Change. In the CRP oversight bodies, external partners are majority (70%) and can influence strategic directions of the programs. It is very positive that partners' participation in research management (particularly in Flagship Projects) has increased. However, the evaluation considers that a concerted effort should be made to involve developing country partners with capacity and resources more directly in research management.

Partnerships for generating outputs and impact. Since 2008, a vast majority of CGIAR research outputs have been produced jointly with external partners. Almost all research published in scientific journals is done in partnerships, and the publications analysis suggested that research partnerships are becoming stronger with institutions in the North, with positive effect on science quality as judged using bibliometric indicators. At the same time research publishing with developing country partners alone has decreased.

CGIAR is totally dependent on partnerships for getting its research disseminated and scaled for development impact. CRPs have reported outputs and success in delivery attributable to specific partnerships. However, the discourse on the expected impact of CGIAR has been somewhat confused with an expectation for CGIAR to meet fixed outcome targets. While most stakeholders realize that last-mile delivery is outside CGIAR's core skills and comparative advantage, there is also strong pressure to demonstrate impact from CGIAR programs. While attention to impact from research is important, the expectations need to be realistic. Success stories where CGIAR has made good progress towards scaling show the importance of early planning for delivery with different public and private partners engaging in different roles of the delivery network, and that some capacity exists at national level to take up the research outputs. Many types of boundary partners are needed to be intermediaries for technologies developed by CGIAR and its partners to reach their intended users in large scales, while allowing CGIAR to remain focused on its comparative advantage as a research institution.

Recommendations

The evaluation made six recommendations – the first three relate to strategic selection of partnerships, two relate to the enabling environment and one on partnerships in action.

◆ Recommendation 1.

All CRPs should have a distinct partnership strategy and accompanying operational plan.

Strategies should clearly align approaches to partnerships with research strategies and theories of change, and make clear the objectives for partner selection and engagement to strengthen research implementation, delivery and scaling of results. Operational plans should provide a basis for monitoring progress in development of partnerships. There is value in developing these documents because of the collective analysis it will require, and to build on what was described in the Phase 2 proposals and ensure it is actioned. Centers that have not recently updated their partnership strategies may find value in doing so. Documented strategies should reflect the internal relationships that Centers have in CRPs.

◆ Recommendation 2.

Strategic reviews should be conducted of multi-stakeholder partnership models.

In order to optimize CGIAR's involvement and investment of resources in multi-stakeholder platforms, System-level strategic reviews should be conducted of the types of partnerships in which CGIAR has invested heavily or where it expects to expand participation. Global MSPs dealing with environment, food security and nutrition are a priority for such a review. The aim of these reviews would be to draw lessons on the following:

- i. the objectives of CGIAR participation in this type of partnership;
- ii. CGIAR's comparative advantage and role in these this type of multi-stakeholder platform;
- iii. resources and capacities involved; and
- iv. their potential to enhance program objectives, and to offer strategic guidance for future engagement.

The evaluation sees this review as a follow-on exercise to the report on partnerships that has been published by the ISPC, and therefore something that it may be appropriate for the ISPC to undertake.

◆ Recommendation 3.

A strategic analysis should be conducted at System level for guiding the development of public-private partnership.

Given the importance attached to partnership with the private sector and the uneven progress that has so far been made, an analysis should be carried out at System level of the following aspects:

- i. a broad plan for engagement with multinationals and smaller companies to best fit the needs of the SRF; and
- ii. drawing on experience to date, principles of engaging with private sector organizations according to their size and global reach.

The strategy should acknowledge both CGIAR's comparative advantage as a public sector entity with field presence in developing countries, and any potential risks to reputation. The evaluation sees the strategy development process as a way of consolidating and expanding the thinking that has been done by CGIAR's governing bodies previously, and progressing towards implementable guidelines.

It may be necessary to implement practical measures to support the implementation of the strategy, such as support on due diligence processes to assess partners and advice to Centers from IPR specialists.

◆ **Recommendation 4.**

A position paper on funding should be prepared and used for influencing discussion and decisions on funding of partnerships.

Given the growing contribution of bilateral funding to total CGIAR funding, the System Council should prepare guidance on how it expects CGIAR and Centers to contribute to supporting partnerships when funding is dominated by primarily bilateral projects, and how co-financing of research and development by partners and stakeholders can be best stimulated. This discussion should be linked to a reassessment of the scope of CGIAR's research portfolio and funding requirements relative to the SLOs.

At the same time, in order to minimize disruption to partnerships resulting from problems with funding, the System Council and System Organization should work together to a) reduce to the extent possible large fluctuations and late delivery of Window 1 and 2 funding, and b) attempt to find a way to provide funding with multi-annual budgets.

◆ **Recommendation 5.**

System-wide organizational learning on using partnerships to best effect should be enhanced.

The System Management Board should oversee activities to enhance organizational learning about partnerships through the following activities, with support from central funding:

- i. taking advantage of opportunities offered by existing activities that bring scientists together across Centers and CRPs;
- ii. preparing periodic meta-synthesis report on partnerships from narrative information in the annual reports; and
- iii. in selected countries that are a focus for the country collaboration process, introducing mechanisms by which locally-based Centers and their partners can reflect and learn together about their partnerships.

◆ **Recommendation 6.**

Emerging and developing country NARS with strong capacity should be more closely involved in research management in CRPs.

In order to strengthen relationships with those emerging and developing country NARS who have strong research capacity, CRPs and Centers should increase their efforts to involve these institutions in planning and management of CRP research.

The evaluation recognises that the recommendation to increase developing country NARS involvement in research management will be challenging to implement. As well as commitment from CGIAR, it requires that the home organizations of the science leaders from NARS encompasses regional or global development issues, and are willing to express their interest in CGIAR through engagement with the CRP process and investment of resources. For this reason, only a small number of developing country partners are likely to be interested and qualified for direct involvement in research management.



For more information, please visit: iea.cgiar.org