

Independent CRP-Commissioned External Evaluation of the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) Final Report

Independent quality validation report October 2015

Introduction and background

This report represents a summary statement on the quality of the final evaluation report concerning A4NH. It has been prepared by an external and independent senior evaluation expert who is a member of the quality validation review panel created by IEA. The main purpose of this brief report is to provide an overall indication to CGIAR Management and the Fund Council concerning the quality of the final A4NH evaluation report.

This quality assessment statement follows the quality validation process for CRP-commissioned evaluations; a detailed description of the IEA support and validation process is accessible online: http://iea.cgiar.org/sites/default/files/5CRPCCEEs_1.pdf.

This assessment focuses primarily on the final report of the evaluation, while also taking into consideration the report's annexes, background papers and the expert panel report, as well as the Terms of Reference and Inception Report. The review also considered changes to the draft final report in response to the quality assurance review of this draft, the comments made by the evaluation team in response to this review, as well as the Management Response to the evaluation. This assessment also took into consideration the most recent (January 2015) CGIAR *Standards for Independent External Evaluation* and the Guidance on Evaluation Reports, as well as the recent (2015) document prepared by IEA: *Background, roles and responsibilities for CRP Commissioned Evaluations (CCEE) for the following CRPs: A4NH; Grain Legumes; Humidtropics; Dryland Systems' and Dryland Cereals*.

Overall summary assessment of the A4NH evaluation report

In my view, this is an excellent report with the potential to be very useful, such as helping to inform future directions for the CRP itself, as well as identifying some broader system-wide CGIAR considerations. The report considers numerous dimensions concerning A4NH and addresses a wide range of evaluation questions. It provides a balanced perspective of the accomplishments and strengths of A4NH as well as challenges faced and significant background considerations. The findings are based upon a wide range of different but complementary methods, with limitations and qualifications appropriately identified and taken into consideration. It is clear that considerable thought has clearly gone into this evaluation and into the report, including its supplementary documents.

In my view, the evaluation, and its final report, respond well and are consistent with the Principles and Standards identified in the *CGIAR Standards for Independent External Evaluation* (January 2015).

The evaluation report, while lengthy, is very readable. It is organised around the four key evaluation questions for the evaluation. In my view, this works well for this evaluation, while noting that this approach varies from perhaps a more common organisation around the CGIAR evaluation criteria and that for evaluation of a programme as complex as a CRP, there is no perfect or best structure for presenting the findings and implications.

The conclusions and recommendations in the report generally follow well from the findings and analysis provided. I also note that the Management Response to this evaluation accepted all the recommendations¹ and provided action plans for responding to these. The recommendations also seem to be consistent with the draft pre-proposal for Phase II of the CRP. Supplementing the report proper are some 12 annexes, an expert panel report, and five background papers.

In my view, the Executive Summary is particularly strong, succinctly highlighting the background, main findings, conclusions, and recommendations. In my experiences, it is rare to find executive summaries of other reports that are as succinct but informative as in this case.

It is not the purpose of this review to attempt to summarise the main findings of the evaluation; as indicated above, the Executive Summary does this quite well. I do note, however, that the main conclusion of the evaluation is that: "the CRP is generally making good progress against its planned deliverables". The evaluation indicates that the main reasons for slippages and dropped deliverables follow from funding issues. There are good discussions of the strengths and accomplishments of the programme, generally positive, as well as its future potential, and also challenges and some areas for improvement. There is a short but reasonable and balanced discussion of the three dimensions of Quality of Science (processes, inputs and outputs) consistent with the CGIAR evaluation standards. Consistent with what was agreed at the inception phase and as discussed and explained in the report, the evaluation approach did not include the evaluation team making their own 'expert judgements' on the scientific quality of A4NH research, instead focusing on key A4NH systems and resources with respect to the three dimensions of science quality identified in the *Standards*.

In particular, there is excellent and balanced consideration of various trade-offs facing the programme (such as pressures to publish vs. pressures to deliver measurable results on the ground). The report also identifies a variety of system-wide considerations that also influence the process of A4NH and its ability to deliver against expectations.

Additional observations

Generally, there has been a very reasoned response to the comments provided by the quality assurance review of the draft report, with no significant issues remaining. Most of the comments and suggestions were addressed, with good reasons identified in those few instances where these were not followed (all concerning minor points). All major issues raised with respect to the draft report seem to have been addressed in the final report.

My main quibble with the report concerns its length. The *IEA Guidance on evaluation reports* says: "The Evaluation Report should be clear and concise and not exceed 80 pages." At 89 pages for the report proper, it slightly exceeds the specified maximum page limit, and it can hardly be considered concise. In my view, with such a lengthy report, trying to cover all possible issues, there is a danger of losing focus and overwhelming the reader. Perhaps contributing to the danger of information overload are the 12 annexes (202 pages), five background papers (80 pages), and the Expert Panel report (47 pages), as well as references and links to a variety of other documents that are located online.

Having observed this, it is difficult to fault the evaluation team for such a detailed and comprehensive report. This is consistent with what was requested in the Terms of Reference, which were indeed quick broad, and reiterated in the Inception Report. The report length, while slightly exceeding the stipulated length in the *Guidelines*, nevertheless seems to be in line with the length of other CGIAR evaluation reports (indeed, shorter than some). While there seems to be more annexes and other background material for this evaluation than with many other reports, some users may view these as helpful complements to the main report.

¹ N.B. This concerns the eight main recommendations for A4NH. I have not seen a response to the three recommendations for CGIAR central institutions.