

Independent CRP-commissioned
External Evaluation of A4NH:
Executive Summary



**RESEARCH
PROGRAM ON**
**Agriculture for
Nutrition
and Health**

Led by IFPRI

Background and Context

- S1. The CGIAR Research Program (CRP) on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) is led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), and includes 11 other collaborating CGIAR Centers and numerous other research and development partners. The main objective of A4NH is to ‘work to accelerate progress in improving the nutrition and health of poor people by exploiting and enhancing the synergies between agriculture, nutrition, and health’. A4NH had a budget of around \$60-80 million dollars per year in Phase 1 (2012-14) and four main research components or ‘Flagships’: Biofortification, Integrated Programs and Policies; Value Chains for Enhanced Nutrition, and Agriculture-Associated Diseases.

Purpose, Scope and Objectives of the Evaluation

- S2. The overarching purpose of this evaluation¹ is to “assess the design and implementation of the A4NH CRP, and to make recommendations in order to enhance the contribution that A4NH is likely to make towards reaching the CGIAR objectives and System-Level Outcomes (SLOs), especially the SLO on improving nutrition and health”. The evaluation aims to contribute to both accountability and learning. Specifically, it will feed into decisions on the next phase of CRPs, to start in 2017. The scope of the evaluation includes all A4NH activities, structures, and institutions, including activities that started earlier and have continued under A4NH.
- S3. This evaluation of A4NH has been commissioned by the CRP itself, by agreement with and oversight from the CGIAR Independent Evaluation Arrangement (IEA). Several safeguards are in place to ensure evaluation independence and quality, including: full access to A4NH files; an independent evaluation team; the Evaluation Oversight Group, which includes independent members; and quality assurance advice and support at key stages provided by IEA. The external evaluation team has kept confidential information in a secure location.
- S4. The evaluation aims to answer four main evaluation questions (EQs). These were set by the A4NH Program Management Committee, and then the questions and subquestions were developed and refined following wide consultation and quality assurance.
- EQ1: Is A4NH on course to achieve its outputs, outcomes and impacts? Why or why not?
 - EQ2: Within the CGIAR, has A4NH added value in comparison to pre-reform ways of doing business? Any disadvantages?
 - EQ3: Does A4NH have the right resources, systems and approaches to partnerships?

¹ This is taken from the Terms of Reference, and is worded similarly to other CRP evaluations

EQ4: Is the scope and focus of A4NH relevant and appropriate?

Approach and methods

- S5. Our ambitions were for a ‘utilization-focused’ approach to this evaluation: i.e. a joint learning process producing practical recommendations for action –at the same time maintaining appropriate independence. Although we have not managed to carry out every aspect of the utilization-focused approach as defined in the evaluation literature, we have tried to follow the underlying philosophy, including closely involving key decision-makers in the design of the evaluation; facilitating self-evaluation; and early feedback and discussion of emerging findings.
- S6. An expert in human resource, capacity development and partnership issues was included in the core team, since challenges in these areas were highlighted in the preparatory phase. Another feature was an Expert Panel, commissioned to look at the pros and cons of different areas of focus of A4NH.
- S7. Other methods used in the evaluation included:
- Individual interviews involving over 250 stakeholders
 - Country visits to Bangladesh, India and Kenya, with additional skype interviews with Nigeria, covering a stratified random sample of 18 A4NH projects
 - Discussions with key staff in collaborating CGIAR Centers
 - Analyses of randomized samples of A4NH project documentation and publications
 - Analysis of A4NH finance and outputs
 - Mapping agriculture, nutrition and health (‘ANH’) activities undertaken by other CRPs
 - Observation of key A4NH meetings
 - Review of nearly 400 documents and establishment of an online library shared with A4NH.
- S8. The evaluation took place at a time when A4NH was itself moving quickly forward to plan Phase 2, holding wide stakeholder consultations on both existing and new areas of work. The evaluation team has endeavored to work closely with A4NH throughout, and feed into the process and thinking. (The A4NH pre-proposal for Phase II (August 2015), prepared after the first draft of this evaluation report, incorporates most of our recommendations.)

Main findings and conclusions

Evaluation Question 1: Is A4NH on course to achieve its planned outputs, outcomes and impacts? Why or why not?

- S9. We judge that the CRP is generally making good progress against its planned ‘deliverables’, although with some slippage on dates. We discuss the main reasons for delays and dropped ‘deliverables’: in the majority of cases, the underlying factors are unstable funding and fragmented bilateral support to the CGIAR, issues which the CGIAR reform was intended to address.
- S10. It is not currently possible to assess whether A4NH will reach all its expected impacts, as much of the research is in the discovery or proof of concept stage. The A4NH Program Management Unit (PMU) is putting in place theories of change which rigorously identify the assumptions in impact pathways and the strength of the evidence for each assumption, which will form a good basis for judgment of risks and prioritization of research. Some areas like Biofortification are

already at delivery stage, and have amassed rigorous evidence that expected impacts can be achieved at a broad scale.

Evaluation Question 2: Within the CGIAR, has A4NH added value? Have the advantages of the CRP outweighed the disadvantages?

- S11. We concluded that the CRP has added value to CGIAR research and that its advantages outweigh the disadvantages, although there are some areas for improvement. In staff surveys and interviews, A4NH was praised for its “inspiring” leadership of ANH issues across the CGIAR and its flexible inclusive approach. The main area for improvement cited was internal CRP/cross-CGIAR communications. The evaluation team also found that communications (internal and external) was under-resourced, and have suggested that a study be made of this area.
- S12. A4NH aimed to add value, as a CRP, to four specific areas: impact orientation, gender, coordination, and monitoring, evaluation and learning. We find that A4NH has added value in all these areas, despite the short time frame (most investment started less than two years ago), and we support further investment in each area to increase the results. One issue is that much of this work is being undertaken by the PMU – even when it is highly technical and integral to the research - and is therefore counted as an administrative overhead.
- S13. The principal negative effects of working with A4NH have also been reported by staff in other CRPs, and originate from the incomplete CGIAR reforms. The main issues found were: the burden on researchers from multiple systems of planning and reporting, reducing research productivity; and the multiple negative effects of funding instability, including delayed and dropped ‘deliverables’ and strained relationships with partners. The overall effect is that Center managers and researchers increasingly see CRPs as “difficult small donors”, and they are putting increased effort into getting bilateral funding, undermining the objectives of the CGIAR reform.

Evaluation Question 3: Does A4NH have the right resources, systems & approaches to partnerships?

- S14. This Chapter addresses a wide variety of structures, systems, processes and resources that are essential to attaining A4NH outputs, outcomes and impacts. A4NH, like other CRPs, has limited room for maneuver, as many of the key systems (e.g. science quality, human resources and contracting, monitoring) are largely the responsibility of Centers or the Consortium. We make recommendations for cross-CGIAR work to address some important issues which are beyond the control of CRPs. These include harmonized monitoring systems, which we consider an urgent priority, and also Center systems for assuring science quality and ethics. We also recommend some improvements to governance and management structures, in line with recommendations made for other CRPs in IEA evaluations.
- S15. This Chapter also raises a variety of issues related to A4NH policies, such as conflict of interest and problems that can arise in partnerships. We recommend that A4NH clarify and publicize the policy and minimum standards that it is using in each area, using Consortium policies wherever available, or other suitable policies e.g. from the lead Center. We also recommend that the Consortium move swiftly towards developing and promulgating fundamental policies for CRPs in Phase 2, building on existing policies and on experience.

Evaluation Question 4: Is the scope and focus of A4NH relevant and appropriate?

- S16. During the course of this evaluation, A4NH was engaged in preparing its pre-proposal for Phase 2 of the CRPs, and consulting with a wide range of technical experts and other stakeholders. The evaluation Expert Panel made specific suggestions on the pros and cons of specific activities in five key focus areas for A4NH: agriculture-associated diseases; value chains, food systems and the private sector; urbanization, obesity and dual burden; policy and enabling environment; and nutrition-sensitive agriculture/ development, which fed into these discussions.
- S17. As A4NH gears up for Phase 2, it is important to reflect on the lessons from Phase 1. In our view, the Biofortification flagship (HarvestPlus) - which is the most mature - provides a model for managing a complex, long-term, multi-Center research program: it has maintained a clear vision of impact and the various steps in the impact pathway, conducted rigorous research evidence to test assumptions, and moved to address risks. This has resulted in a virtuous circle, as the program has then been able to mobilize sufficient long-term funding to bring Centers and other partners together and to conduct long-term trials, without the need to chase short-term funding opportunities to keep its researchers employed. In contrast, some parts of A4NH (and the CGIAR in general) have assembled a loose group of research projects around a central idea, partly because A4NH could not fully control what research projects were 'mapped' to the CRP, and partly because the uncertain funding environment encourages CGIAR researchers to take on a variety of bilateral donor funded projects. While the evaluation team would encourage A4NH to follow the HarvestPlus example and focus on a few core research questions, we also recognize that A4NH cannot cut itself off from the rest of research in agriculture, nutrition and health (ANH). A4NH has - and will continue to have - an important role not only in raising the quality of ANH work across the CGIAR but also in supporting innovative research in ANH.
- S18. We conclude therefore that putting clear boundaries around A4NH, and defining a 'core research program' that is clearly separated from a broader 'ANH value added program,' is potentially an important organizing principle for A4NH in Phase 2. This would allow A4NH to focus its research efforts and resource mobilization on a few core research questions that could attract a critical mass of research talent. It would also give A4NH sufficient resources to continue to support innovative and relevant NH work across the CGIAR, without having to take on the management burden for this 'value added work' in its core flagships. (A1,A2,A3)
- S19. Gender issues have been a prime focus of A4NH, and this has resulted in an increased focus on gender in research across the program, as well as some high-quality research on gender and nutrition. However gender cannot be addressed in isolation while ignoring the way that gender interacts with other social differences (e.g. wealth, caste, and ethnicity). We find that social equity issues have not been adequately addressed in A4NH, although it is crucial for ANH outcomes. Although many A4NH programs target "the poor", social analysis and disaggregated data are often lacking. The lack of information about differences between and within communities affects practical decisions made by technical programs, e.g. which types of households should be targeted for certain technologies, or whether to work mainly with the formal or informal private sector. (A6)

Recommendations

This wide-ranging evaluation has generated much discussion, and many minor suggestions from the evaluation team, which can be found in relevant sections of the report. However the evaluation recommendations can only focus on a few key issues, listed below. The proposed timing for implementation for all recommendations is by the beginning of Phase II of the CRPs, in 2017.

Some of the issues identified in this evaluation need to be addressed at CGIAR level, including science quality, policies and a harmonized system for planning monitoring and reporting for CRPs. We have therefore made three recommendations for central CGIAR institutions. The three related recommendations for A4NH (A4, A5 and A7i) have been drafted in the recognition that it may take time to sort everything out at CGIAR level, but in the meantime A4NH and other CRPs need to find a working arrangement (for example, adopting lead Center policies in the absence of cross-CGIAR policies).

Three main recommendations for CGIAR Central Institutions:

C 1 Scientific leadership² in the CGIAR System should set standards for science quality and research management and monitor and support Centers to achieve these.

C 2 The Consortium should develop key CGIAR-wide policies that can be adopted by CRPs, in areas where these do not already exist: for example on conflict of interest, social equity, partnerships

C 3 The Consortium should urgently work with CRPs and funders to agree a harmonized monitoring system that meets management and reporting needs for all CRPs and (if possible) key bilateral funders, taking into account the balance between management and accountability needs and not imposing excessive demands on researchers. This should include agreeing minimum standards and harmonized formats for basic information to be provided on every research project.

Eight main recommendations for A4NH:

A 1 Establish clear boundaries around A4NH in the final Phase II proposal, clearly distinguishing two primary modalities of A4NH work: (a) A4NH's 'core' research activities and (b) 'A4NH value added activities', supporting ANH work in the CGIAR and elsewhere.

- i. Establish a structured and transparent process for decisions on whether and under which modality to support new research proposals. Resist 'mapping' of research activities to A4NH which do not fall into one of the two core areas of work, or which do not meet CGIAR policies and standards.

² This recommendation was originally addressed to the ISPC and the Consortium, but we have reworded it in more general terms (after consultation with the ISPC Chair), as there is an ongoing task force - set up following the MidTerm Review of the CGIAR Reform - to consider the ISPC's role and powers (ISPC Secretariat, 2015).

A 2 Build up a high-quality A4NH-branded core research program focusing on a few centerpiece research areas linked to the CGIAR Strategy and Results Framework (SRF).

- i. Prioritize a limited number of research areas as the ‘centerpieces’ of A4NH research and concentrate resource mobilization efforts on these. Each proposed ‘centerpiece area’ should have a clear set of initial research questions based on a theory of change, identified evidence gaps and clear links to SRF Outcomes. The selection of centerpiece areas should follow a transparent prioritization process overseen by the IAC/CRP governance body.

A 3 Make a coordinated investment in support to ‘value added’ ANH work across the CGIAR, managed as a coherent program, with clear goals and targets, adequate funding and human resources.

- i. Create and support an ANH Community of Practice (CoP) across the CGIAR. This should focus on specific CGIAR technical (research) and institutional needs, and draw upon but not duplicate the work of relevant external communities of practice.
- ii. Conduct (or commission) regular technical reviews of ANH work undertaken across the CGIAR, and convene regular meetings with other CRPs to discuss learning and future opportunities.
- iii. Fund or co-fund innovative ANH research across the CGIAR. Set clear objectives and criteria for this support, and establish a transparent process for prioritization and allocation of funds. This support should be managed separately from the core A4NH research program.

A 4 Adopt CGIAR standards of research quality as soon as these become available (see C1). In the meantime, set out clear expectations of the minimum research management processes required for all A4NH-supported research, making reference to these in key contractual agreements (e.g. PPAs), research program strategies, and in the Phase II proposal.

- i. A4NH should require Centers to adequately document all research projects supported by A4NH, showing what science quality processes have been followed. This would apply both to core A4NH research and that supported under the A4NH wider ‘value added’ program.

A 5 Adopt key CGIAR policies as soon as these become available (see C2), making reference to them in key contractual agreements (e.g. PPAs), research program strategies, and in the Phase II proposal. In the absence of CGIAR policies, A4NH should adopt existing policies from the Lead Center or other suitable sources.

- i. These should cover at least the following areas: Conflict of Interest (including institutional COI), Gender and social equity; Environment Research ethics; Partnerships; Working with the private sector; Intellectual property; Data management and open data

A 6 Make a commitment to systematically address social equity issues, including attention to disaggregated data and social analysis

- i. Include ‘attention to social equity’ as a basic quality expectation for A4NH research, wherever relevant.
- ii. Build researcher capacity on social equity issues in ANH.

A 7 Strengthen the A4NH monitoring and evaluation function

- i. Work with Consortium Office and other stakeholders to agree and adopt a harmonized CGIAR/CRP research project monitoring system that meets management and reporting needs and sets minimum standards of basic information required for all research projects in Phase II.
- ii. Implement the plans for a regular rolling program of CRP-Commissioned External Evaluations (CCEEs) of different Flagships and key areas of work, with sufficient resources to allow technical areas to be investigated in depth.
- iii. Invest in strategic evaluations, including impact evaluations, of research which is in the ‘adoption phase’. Develop a clear strategy for prioritizing such evaluations.
- iv. Make institutional arrangements for oversight of all A4NH evaluations to safeguard their independence from those promoting the interventions being evaluated. Oversight should include inputs into questions to

A 8 Strengthen A4NH governance and management to support the above agenda

- i. Conflict of Interest policies should be operationalized in management and governance structures.
- ii. The CRP governance structure should be adequately resourced to carry out its agreed structure and functions (following Consortium/Fund Council agreements). *Inter alia* it should take on the oversight of A4NH M&E, with this responsibility allocated to nominated individuals.
- iii. Strengthen the A4NH management structures, in alignment with central CRP agreements.
- iv. Strengthen the Program Management Unit to support the A4NH agenda, in particular resource mobilization and communication