

Independent CRP-Commissioned External Evaluation of the CGIAR Research Program on Dryland Systems (DS) Final Report

Independent quality validation report

Introduction and background

This report represents a summary statement on the quality of the final report of the evaluation of DS. 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 and usefulness of the final 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, 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. 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 CRP-DS evaluation report

In my view, this is an excellent report, with a tight and strong and compelling writing style. The Executive Summary and the Conclusion chapters in my view also provides good summaries of the main findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this evaluation. The report has been substantially revised, and significantly improved, since the submission of the first draft. In my view, it has admirably responded to quality assurance comments on the draft, as well as to observations and corrections from the PMU and the Oversight Committee, the later in part to try to reflect recent developments that will affect the future of dryland agricultural systems research in the CGIAR.

I find this report well balanced and evidence based. For example, while it identifies shortcomings of CRP-DS, it also explains the reasons for these, as well as documenting more recent improvements, progress, and accomplishments. Helpfully, the report explains the context within which the program has been operating and the rationale for many of what was, or was not, undertaken and accomplished.

This report draws upon multiple sources of evidence. It is very clear about what questions the evaluation has been able to answer, as well as those for which the evidence base is too weak to draw firm conclusions. As applicable, it is open about limitations and qualifications concerning various data sources, differences in findings and perspectives, and for those questions for which it is not possible to draw conclusions at the present time, explaining the reasons for this (for example, concerning impact and sustainability). The report is consistent with the CGIAR *Standards and Guidelines* for independent external evaluations and reports.

This evaluation has adapted well to the changes taking place with CGIAR with implications for CRP-DS since the evaluation started. For example, the Terms of Reference for the evaluation had indicated that it was expected to "provide useful evaluative information to CRP stakeholders that will inform the development of their full proposals for the upcoming Second Call for CRP proposals."

However, in late May 2015, well into the period of this evaluation, a decision was made to establish a new CRP landscape that would more clearly support the new CGIAR Strategic Results Framework (CGIAR 2015). As the report indicates: “As part of the proposed re-alignment of the CRPs, the current Dryland Systems, Dryland Cereals, and Grain Legumes CRPs would be merged into one CRP, to be called CGIAR Research Program 1, Dryland Cereals and Legumes Agri-food Systems (DCLAS)... As well, the work currently being done by the Dryland Systems CRP would be, to some degree, continued within the proposed Flagship 5: 'Improved Rural Livelihood Systems'”.

The evaluation takes into account this changed landscape, and in my view provides helpful observations and recommendations that appear relevant and worthy of consideration and may help inform the new direction – as well as how the value of the current CRP-DS can be maximised during the remainder of its lifetime. For example, drawing from the findings of the evaluation, the report makes some potentially useful observations such as including a holistic integrated systems vision linking socio-economics and agro-ecologies in the new DCLAS CRP. It also includes a good discussion of the meaning of the “systems” concept – which has proved challenging for CRP-DS, and evidentially also for some other systems CRPs. As the report documents, it has also been challenging for many of the scientists working within the CRP to fully comprehend the meaning of a systems approach, and even more difficult to apply this in practice and in the field.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I find this an excellent evaluation report, which provides a balanced view of the accomplishments as well as limitations of the CRP-DS, and the reasons for these. It also provides many ideas and suggestions worthy of consideration for informing the remainder of the CRP-DS as well as for any future activities in these areas.