

Independent Quality validation report

for the CRP Commissioned External Evaluation (CCEE) of the
CGIAR Research Program (CRP) on Dryland Cereals

March 2016 Introduction and background

This report represents a summary statement on the quality of the final report of the evaluation of the Dryland Cereals CRP (DS-CRP or “the Programme”). 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 this 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 its Terms of Reference and Inception Report. The review also considered changes to the draft final report in response to the quality assurance review and feedback on the draft report conducted by IEA and independent evaluators. 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 DC-CRP evaluation report

The final evaluation report of DC-CRP is quite comprehensive, addressing a wide range of evaluation topics and questions under all the key evaluation criteria as had been identified in its Terms of Reference and Inception Report. In general, the report provides adequate substantiation for its statements and conclusions. Significant improvements were made to the earlier draft report in response to observations from the quality assurance review of the draft. The final report now is generally consistent with the CGIAR *Standards*. The report overall presents a reasonable assessment of the programme, providing information, insights and recommendations that, together with information from other sources, can be useful in informing the remainder of the current phase and the following phase of the Programme.

Taking the above into account, the report nevertheless is not without some limitations. In particular, perhaps through a desire to be comprehensive, the report largely consists of discussions of a succession of specific questions, mainly addressed one at a time, with some but limited cross-referencing. While the report indicated that six “overarching questions were formulated to explore the extent of added value generated” by the Programme, there is just a very cursory two-page discussion of these overarching questions in an abbreviated Conclusions section. As a result, there is limited sense of priority or attention to “big picture” considerations. For example, there is no overall discussion in the report about questions such as: What are the main accomplishments and areas of strengths of DC-CRP? Main challenges and opportunities faced, and how the Programme has responded to these? Main areas where improvements could be made and which might be most needed? Future potential for added value?

The final evaluation report provides 15 recommendations. However, there is limited sense of priority among these recommendations, and the report is not explicit about who would need to act upon each of these. It also is not clear the extent to which stakeholders have been able to engage in active

discussion of this final set of recommendations in particular, such as with respect to their relevance, priority, and practicality

Some other observations

Timing of evaluation implementation. Unusually, most of the actual data gathering, including field visits for this evaluation, preceded rather than followed completion, and approval, of the Inception Report. Given that the main purpose of an inception phase is to identify and to provide approval for the design and priorities for an evaluation, as well as specific plans and protocols for data collection. This timing seems questionable, at best.

Quality of science. The discussion in the report on quality of science, expanded from an earlier draft, is now reasonable. However, the report notes that the analysis of quality of science was “light touch” and that “resources allocated for the evaluation did not allow time for in-depth analysis of publications.... The emphasis was primarily on management for quality research rather than a detailed assessment of science quality itself.” Given the importance of quality of science to CGIAR, it is unfortunate the limited priority given to this topic in this evaluation, and should have been more carefully considered during the terms of reference and inception phases.

The evaluation report may have understated the Programme’s achievements in this area. Within the text in the section on quality of science, evidence is presented indicating that the publication record of DC-CRP is at least as high as that of other CRPs. Nevertheless, the report concludes that: “the publication record could be strengthened in terms of more publication in high impact journals.” While of course there is always room for improvement, this conclusion seems rather harsh given the evidence presented.

Survey response rates. Limited response rates to the scientist and partner surveys present a strong possibility of non-response bias, and thus findings based upon these data should be viewed cautiously, treated indicatively rather definitively unless validated with data from other sources. The report indicates that just 36 scientists, 40% of those who were requested to participate, responded at all, and just over 20% (7 or so respondents) of these were ICARDA scientists (the remainder were from ICRISAT). Just 27 people –31% – responded to the partner survey, with Annexes 5 and 6 indicating lower response rates to many of the questions on both surveys. With such low response rates, especially from partners, which very likely are not fully representative of the broader populations, even many seemingly large percentage differences based upon such data are not likely to be statistically (or otherwise) significant, nor representative of the broader population. For example, differences of 10% may reflect just a difference of 2 or 3 respondents (absolute numbers of respondents are not generally provided in the report proper).

It may well be, as the report claims, that these response rates are similar to those in many other online surveys. This however does not make these data valid, nor consistent with the broader literature about the potential of non-response bias, and there is indeed a literature on how response rates can be maximised. Thus, data from the two surveys of the DC-CRP evaluation should, at best, be viewed and treated with caution.

Conclusion

The final evaluation report of DC-CRP is quite comprehensive and provides adequate substantiation for its statements and conclusions, and is generally consistent with the CGIAR *Standards for Evaluations*. As indicated above, the evaluation and its report have some weaknesses, in particular with respect to insufficient focus. Despite these limitations, however, , the final evaluation report of DC-CRP does provide considerable evidence-based information, ideas and recommendations worthy of consideration that can be used to help inform future directions of the Programme, in its current as well as its subsequent phases.