

The Process for Review and Approval of Mega Program Proposals

July 1, 2010

I. The MP Review and Approval Process

The Mega Program (MP) review and approval process will create a seamless authorizing environment for MPs which allows the various entities in the new CGIAR partnership – the CGIAR Centers and Partners, the Consortium Board, the ISPC and the Fund Council supported by the Fund Office to review, advise and approve MPs in light of each entity’s comparative advantage and role in the partnership. Such functions will be exercised in accordance with agreed criteria in order to ensure that funded MP proposals are, among other things, consistent with the CGIAR Strategy and Results Framework, demonstrate high research quality and relevance, show the potential for high development impact, will be well-governed and that any risks will be managed appropriately.

II. Purpose of this Note

The purpose of this note is to provide a basis for discussion of the MP authorizing environment. In particular, this note:

1. Describes the different stages of the MP Review and Approval Process.
2. Clarifies the roles and responsibilities of the various entities in the review and approval of MP proposals.
3. Describes the criteria which will apply to the MP Review and Approval Process.

In addition, the note shall be used as a basis to prepare more formal guidance on the MP review and approval for inclusion in the Common Operational Framework.

III. Stages of MP Review and Approval and Related Roles and Responsibilities

There are three distinct stages in the MP Review and Approval process where the roles and responsibilities of the various entities come into play.

1. Assessment and endorsement by Consortium Board¹

- Proposals for Consortium Research Programs may be submitted to the Consortium Board by one or more Member Centers;
- Proposals must address, at the minimum, program purpose and outputs, leadership and management structure, allocation of work and funds across participants, budget, performance measures, progress-tracking and reporting process

¹ Article 14 of the Consortium Constitution

- Proposals for Consortium Research Programs shall be reviewed by the Consortium Board and, if endorsed by the Board, shall be submitted by the Board together with proposals for the allocation of funds across the Programs to the Fund Council for consideration for funding.²
- ISPC may be consulted, as required

2. Review by the Fund Council with advice from ISPC

a. Fund Council (stage1)

- Reviews the MP proposal received from the Consortium Board and its funding recommendations.
- Requests advice from ISPC on quality and relevance of research proposal and partnership arrangement

b. ISPC

- Commissions and oversees evaluations of the scientific quality, relevance, partnership arrangements and likely development effectiveness of the investment proposals submitted by the Consortium to the Fund Council and make recommendations concerning their investment worthiness.
- In undertaking the role described above, the ISPC will also provide feedback and guidance to the Consortium on any areas of concern regarding the quality of the proposed research and partnership arrangements contained in submitted program proposals and on any deficiencies in the ex ante impact assessments provided by the Consortium in support of them.

c. Fund Council (stage2)

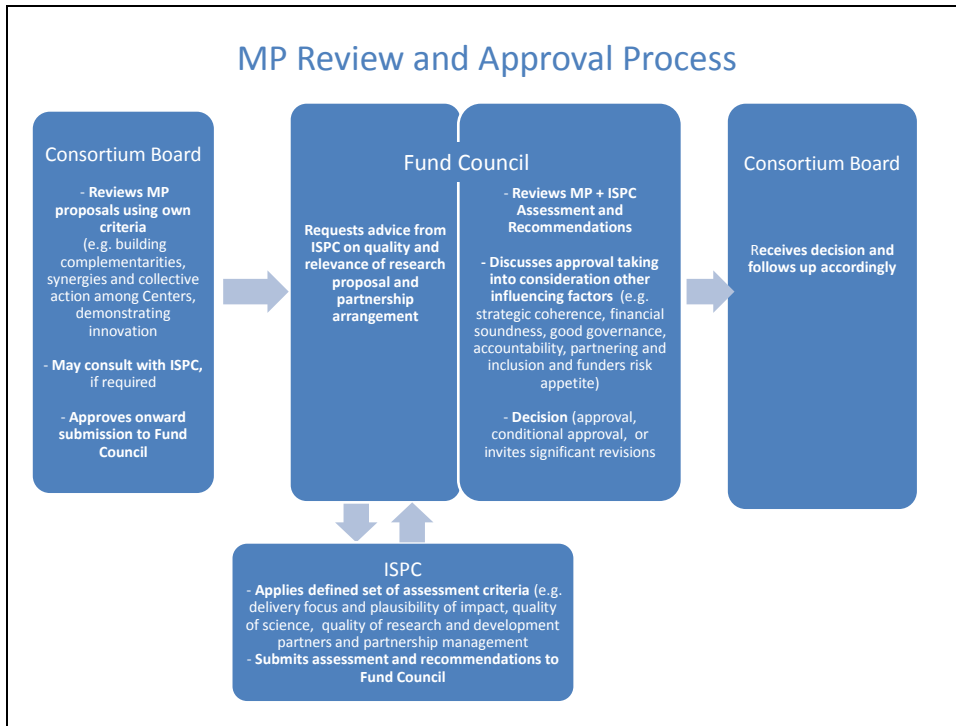
- Reviews the ISPC assessment and its recommendations on investment worthiness.
- May commission additional expert reviews for any funding proposals presented by the Consortium for its approval – as required.
- Discusses the proposal and the ISPC recommendations while also taking into consideration additional decision-making factors.

3. Decision-making by the Fund Council

- Approves, conditionally approves, or invites significant revisions.

² Clarification is needed on whether this would entails a financing plan showing the source of funds and planned allocation of funds within each Consortium Research Program that would be sent to the Fund Council for consideration for funding.

Figure 1: Integrated review and approval process for Mega Program proposals



IV. Detailed MP Review and Approval Criteria

The criteria applied by the various entities and factors weighed during the MP Review and Approval process are described below.

1. Criteria of the Consortium Board

At its meeting in Montpellier in March 2010, the Consortium Board agreed to use a set of criteria for their final selection and approval of MP proposals for submission to the Fund Council. These are summarized in Box 1.

Box 1: Consortium Board Criteria for selection and approval of MP Proposals for submission to the Fund Council

1. Building complementarities, synergies and collective action among Centres in line with the CGIAR reform process, and ensuring that strategic research planning is done collaboratively among Centres and partners;
2. Demonstrating innovation; new areas of CGIAR work with interactions among Centres and greater partnerships (including outside the CGIAR Centres) in different regions;
3. Producing greater impact on the ground in terms of reducing poverty and hunger and improving food security and environmental sustainability. The impact pathway must be clearly spelled out and quantified.
4. Indicating clear strategic focus and added value to current Centres and programs
5. Each MP needs to articulate clearly its strategy regarding gender research issues and capacity building

The Board also agreed that the following items should be addressed:

- A one-page abstract
- Clear objectives
- Justification of the project
- Measurable results
- Centres involved and their input
- Management arrangements for implementation
- Timeframe
- Expected outcomes
- Necessary partners at the international, national and regional level
- Innovation
- Integration with other MPs
- Risk
- Quantified impact pathway
- Gender research strategy
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Budget
- Names of 3-4 referees

Source: Notes and Decisions, Consortium Board / Alliance Meetings, March 27, 31 and 1 April 2010, Montpellier, France

The Consortium Board may consult with the ISPC on a needed basis on certain aspects of the draft proposals received. As the legal body eventually entering into a contract with the Fund Council, the Consortium makes the final decision on a MP Proposals for submission to the Fund Council.

2. Criteria of the Interim Independent Science and Partnership Council (i-ISPC)

As part of its role and responsibility, the i-ISPC will organize **ex ante assessments of MP proposals** submitted by the Consortium Board and **advise the Fund Council on scientific quality, relevance, partnership arrangements and likely development effectiveness**

In the ISPC's assessment of the MP proposals, emphasis will be placed on aspects of the proposals relevant for a Program's ability to conduct high quality research and efficiently deliver results (please see annex 1). The ISPC will draw on independent external peer reviewers to assist in the assessment. The MP assessors will be asked to provide (i) narrative assessments and (ii) scoring of the proposal for its

quality on each criterion. Electronic consultation among the assessors will be used to clarify important issues and points of difference before the ISPC arrives at its final judgment and recommendations.

Box 2: ISPC's main assessment criteria of MP proposals

The ISPC intends to base the assessment on six main criteria:

1. Clarity of Program objectives
2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact
3. Quality of science
4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management
5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management
6. Efficiency of governance

Source: interim Independent Science and Partnership Council of the CGIAR, CRITERIA FOR the ISPC's ASSESSMENT OF MEGA PROGRAM PROPOSALS, June 18, 2010, submitted to the Fund Council.

3. Fund Council

The Fund Council will (i) review the MP proposal received from the Consortium Board together with (ii) the ISPC assessment and recommendations. The FC will then discuss the proposal and the ISPC recommendations while also taking into consideration additional decision-making factors such as the following:

- strategic coherence of a given MP proposal with CGIAR vision and strategic objectives as well as emerging global development priorities ,
- the financial soundness of a given MP proposal and its overall strategic fit with available funding pool and financial outlook,
- good governance and accountability measures reflected in the program proposal,
- soundness of the M&E plan and its alignment with the CGIAR M&E framework
- degree of partnering with other organizations and inclusion of stakeholders and beneficiaries throughout the implementation of the program
- the funders "risk appetite" in the context of the global financial situation, and in relation to technical, institutional, leadership, partnership, and logistical issues.

There will be communalities among the assessment criteria used by the Consortium Board, ISPC and the Fund Council. The Fund Council approval criteria encompasses all of the ISPC assessment criteria and most of the Consortium Board criteria (e.g. Center specific consideration would play a less important role). In addition, it may take into account other influencing factors as described above and may assign certain weights to the criteria.

**interim Independent Science and Partnership Council
of the CGIAR**

CRITERIA FOR the ISPC's ASSESSMENT OF MEGA PROGRAM PROPOSALS

June 18, 2010

The ISPC's assessment of the Mega Program (MP) proposals is intended for the ISPC (i) to provide recommendations to the Fund Council concerning the investment worthiness of the proposed MPs particularly regarding the scientific quality, relevance, partnership arrangements and likely development effectiveness; and (ii) to provide the Consortium Board feedback and guidance on any areas of concern regarding the quality of the proposed research and partnership arrangements contained in submitted investment proposals and on any deficiencies in the *ex ante* impact assessment provided by the Consortium in support of the proposals.

The ISPC considers coherent and high quality MPs as the corner stone of successfully implementing the CGIAR reform. The MPs must add up to a system that is more tightly focused than current Center programs on high priority areas where the CGIAR has the potential to influence major impacts for its beneficiaries. The ISPC expects that the MP proposals demonstrate explicit design by the signatories to each proposal to address major development challenges identified in the CGIAR's Strategy and Results Framework in a well coordinated manner and through research and research partnerships of highest quality.

In the ISPC's assessment of the MP proposals, emphasis will be placed on aspects of the proposals relevant for a Program's ability to conduct high quality research and efficiently deliver results. The ISPC will draw on independent external peer review of the highest calibre to assist in the assessment. It will engage six external peers covering the main areas of the MP research and partnerships for delivery, and including a reviewer of research leadership, management and oversight. The MP assessors will be asked to provide narrative assessments and scoring of the proposal for its quality on each criterion. Electronic consultation among the assessors will be used to clarify important issues and points of difference before the ISPC arrives at its final judgement and recommendations.

The iISPC anticipates that the assessment of the MP's financial plans, contractual details and IP regimes requiring specialised legal expertise will be conducted in parallel. The ISPC will review the inputs from the external peers consolidating them with its own review and, within one month from date of receipt of the proposal, provide its assessment to the Fund Council and for the information of the Consortium Board.

Because the entire set of MPs will not be developed simultaneously, the ISPC is unlikely to assess (a) specific linkages across the MPs and synergies between them and the relative merits and boundaries of individual MPs; and (b) the adequacy of the entire portfolio of MPs and how it comes together in a balanced way to address the major objectives as described in the SRF. This will be possible only when the entire MP portfolio and the cross-cutting platforms have been designed.

The assessment criteria are intended to be as simple as possible, yet at the same time ensuring they are both relevant and comprehensive to guarantee the highest quality reviews and

sufficiently discriminatory to allow clear identification of strengths of the programs and areas in need of improvement.¹

The ISPC's assessment is based on the following six main criteria:

1. Clarity of Program objectives
2. Delivery focus and plausibility of impact
3. Quality of science
4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management
5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management
6. Efficiency of governance

In the following these criteria are elaborated to indicate what the assessment should entail. A set of indicators is provided for each criterion to guide the peers' assessment.

1. Clarity of Program objectives

The proposal presents a compelling and coherent research plan clearly spelling out the main objectives and the critical linkage to the Strategy and Results Framework. The nature and magnitude of the agricultural development opportunity or constraint being addressed (including target impact domains) is clear and the researchable topics, including research on constraints to uptake, are the most relevant ones. The proposal is supported by a comprehensive analysis of the global research context and the alternative research suppliers. The MP partnership's comparative advantage is well justified. The proposal demonstrates the added value compared to current Center research and indicates synergies to be gained from inter-linkages with other MPs.

Indicators:

- Problem identification with link to SRF is explicit
- Researchable topics are logically derived from key target problems and opportunities
- Analysis of global research context is sufficiently comprehensive and includes recognition of main alternative suppliers of research
- The added value of the MP over Center programs is clear
- IPG nature of research is demonstrated
- Links to regional priorities and/or priority setting processes are indicated

2. Research outputs and plausibility of impact

The proposal contains a complete description of the plausible impact pathway or multiple impact pathways (as required by the different themes of an MP) indicating the intermediate changes (outcomes) towards impacts on food security, poverty and environmental sustainability that the research (outputs) can influence. The estimated benefits are plausible and based on a credible theory of change specific to the field of research. The impact pathway is supported by an appropriate gender analysis (or a plan to conduct such an analyses) and a capacity building plan. The impact pathway also describes what negative impacts may emerge or be associated with other positive results; and identifies the constraining and facilitating factors on which success for outcomes and subsequent impacts may depend.

¹ These criteria subsume the more detailed criteria that have that been issued by the Consortium Board and the iISPC for informing the development of the Mega Programs as well as those used by the Board in its assessment of the MPs prior being submitted to the Fund Council.

The deliverable outputs and intended outcomes are spelled out for the near and intermediate term and sufficiently indicated for the longer term. The sequence of research proposed over time is logical and the time frame for delivering outputs is both stringent and feasible particularly in the near term. The timeframes for addressing major specific research problems within the overall MP agenda are elaborated. A monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan for tracking progress and achievement, for adjusting research plans and for fostering learning is indicated.

Indicators:

- Significance of the planned outputs to address the problem identified
- Volume and feasibility of outputs relative to resources and timeframe
- Inclusion, justification and appropriateness of adaptive research
- Quality of impact pathway analysis and description
- Clear theory of change and credibility of estimated benefits
- Sufficient trade-off analysis of expected positive and potential negative impacts
- Adequacy of gender analysis (or plan)
- Adequacy of activities, such as capacity building and social science research components to enhance relevance and uptake
- Indication of basis for future ex post impact assessment

3. Quality of science

The scientific approach is of high quality irrespective of the orientation of the research whether strategic, applied or more basic research. The proposal sets the proposed research in the context of the overall advancement in the field and research done elsewhere. The proposal presents a clear vision of how research focus is appraised and guarded for efficiency and effectiveness. The research teams and leadership proposed have strong competence and there is critical mass in all areas of research. The analysis of risks inherent in any research is transparent.

Indicators:

- Quality of research hypotheses relating to constraints addressed
- Appropriateness, feasibility and innovation of research approaches chosen
- Ambition of research
- Quality of hypotheses that relate to the constraint addressed
- Research is based on state-of-the art knowledge in the domain and can lead to filling important knowledge gaps
- Facilities and procedures for conducting research are adequate
- Scientific track record of research teams is evident and the track record of research leadership is demonstrated

4. Quality of research and development partners and partnership management

There is strategic justification for inclusion of partners for research complementarity and excellence and for efficiency of generating outcomes. The partnerships can optimally serve the objectives of the MP. The partners' roles are clearly spelled out and related to the impact pathway. There is evidence of the core partners' commitment to the research agenda proposed and the incentives for engagement of partners are clear. The proposal is transparent regarding allocation of funds to partners and management of financial and in-kind contributions from partners.

Indicators:

- Partner inclusion is clearly justified
- Partners' roles and responsibilities, including in M&E, are elaborated
- Evidence of core partners engagement in strategic and research planning
- Appropriate balance of types of partners
- Clear partnership development strategy
- Formal agreements with core partners demonstrate commitment

5. Appropriateness and efficiency of Program management

The proposed management structure is simple and clear. The model chosen promotes program ownership. The management model is efficient and transparent regarding decision making (including quality control, adaptiveness and fund allocation), delivery of results and communications. Appropriate management for research quality should foster recruitment of highly qualified researchers, career development, learning and appropriate capacity building.

The linkages to program host organizations, other core partner organizations, platforms and other System components are clear. The process for fund allocation is transparent, and the planned allocation among program components and core partners is specific.

Considering that the programs may initially be set up by merging management models and cultures of different players, a transition to an optimal management model can be expected.

Indicators

- Clarity of reporting relationships and accountabilities and of research structures
- Management arrangement enables strong program leadership
- The M&E plan is linked to decision making in the program management cycle
- Expenditures as shown in breakdown (by partners, by type of activity) are optimally balanced
- Linkages with other MPs and other relevant System components is adequately defined
- Supporting arrangements are appropriate:
 - Communication strategy
 - Delivery strategy
 - Capacity building strategy
 - Skills resource strategy
 - Risk management strategy

6. Efficiency of governance

Here it is assumed that an MP requires Program-specific light oversight mechanism that facilitates reporting to the Consortium Board. The specific governance arrangement proposed is efficient and tailor-made to the Mega Programs needs. It is light and not onerous. The governance mechanism re-enforces the Consortium Board's role as the body with the overarching oversight responsibility. The proposal demonstrates avoidance of duplication of oversight and conflicting interests in the governance proposed.

Indicators

- Governance roles and accountabilities are clear
- Arrangements with partners' governing bodies are transparent
- Role of Consortium Board in overall oversight is elaborated

- Mechanisms for managing conflict of interest are explicit
- Minimum compliance reporting

Caveats

There are two caveats to guide the assessment of Mega Programs: First; as different areas of research have different characteristics and research trajectories, which have implications for the development and assessment of programs in those areas, these differences ought to be sufficiently considered in the assessments. Second; initially the Mega Programs may be based on mainly on-going research and the ability to take a clean slate approach to designing the program may have been limited. Similarly the Programs may initially rely on transitional management arrangements. Thus the review needs to include an assessment of a proposed transition for bringing the continuous and new elements to optimal balance.