

SCIENCE COUNCIL OF THE CGIAR

Commentary on the IWMI Strategic Plan 2009-2013 'Water for a food-secure world'

SC Secretariat, 6 October 2008

General Comments

IWMI's Strategic Plan 2009-2013 is precise and gives a logical presentation of the key elements of the institute's, vision and mission, guiding principles, research themes, stakeholders and partners, etc. The illustrations and tables are useful. The strategy provides an excellent overview of the contemporary 'water and agriculture' domain and the discussion of IWMI's intended priority themes and sub-themes is good. At the same time, there could be more discussion of process of implementing the strategy, e.g., partnering strategies, priority setting processes. In building on its analysis of the underlying problems at the interface of water and agriculture, the plan should more clearly articulate how IWMI intends to define its own research niche in this vast field, and identify and invest in its areas of comparative advantage. While some topics are comprehensively addressed, others could benefit from more details or further elaboration. Research themes 1 and 2 seem to be more elaborated than themes 3 and 4.

Specific Comments

Center's contributions to CGIAR Priorities and strategic objectives

The strategic plan reflects a high degree of relevance; the four IWMI research themes and their subthemes address the three broad CGIAR 'strategic objectives': food for people, environment for people, and policies for people (p. 10). However, some of the goals and objectives are stated in ways that do not help to identify the subset of issues that IWMI can and should tackle. The strategy could describe further how IWMI will distill out of this broad vision its own narrower focus. IWMI cannot do it all. Targets are plausible in areas where IWMI appears to already have a strong installed capacity, e.g., Production Water Use (Theme 2). Some subthemes, however, appear less plausible, e.g., "Managing the impacts of land degradation on water resources" (Subtheme 3.1). This is a huge research endeavor. How does one actually do this? Is it researchable? Does this not imply considerable broadening of IWMI's core competence? Subtheme 1.2 is another very broad area and appears extremely ambitious. Achieving adaptive management at large spatial scales will be difficult. Is IWMI going to develop generalizable technologies or approaches for doing this, or is it going to contribute to achieving adaptive management in those geographical regions where it has a strong presence? Several of the more general topic sub-themes would be more credible if they made reference to collaboration with other centers, or at least to the CPWF. The latter is only mentioned as an "add-on" at the end of the strategic plan. Collaboration with the CCCP is not mentioned.

In this context, it would be useful for the Plan to describe the research capacity towards which IWMI wants to move. IWMI appears to be in a process of change, moving away from a regional tactical role towards a more strategic global role. If that is the case, is there an intention by management and the board to change IWMI's profile? Or does IWMI believe that it already has the installed capacity to cover the full range of issues described in the strategic plan?

IWMI's Vision and Mission statements are provided in a separate highlighted heading, but how they are derived in the context of the narrative is not entirely clear, nor is it clear whether this is a new vision and mission or the same as the old. Some elaboration would be helpful here.

Center's role and comparative advantage in relation to a changing context for global water management and policy research

Based on its assessment of the existing and emerging priority needs and IWMI's abilities and comparative advantages, IWMI has identified four themes and 12 subthemes that define the research niche it hopes to occupy over the Plan period. It would have been useful for the Plan to include more detail on how the four themes and 12 subthemes were chosen. Details on the priority setting process used and the input of key stakeholders are missing.

While there are a number of international institutions that deal with various aspects of water policy and technology, as well as land and water management related issues and opportunities, none probably has the scope of IWMI in terms of geographic spread, access to the global water related research establishment and partnerships. Still, the Plan provides no references to other international initiatives dealing with water issues. It would help define IWMI's comparative advantage if it were set in the context of the roles of the World Water Forum, the World Water Council, water activities under FAO (including IPTRID) and other international bodies. There is only a general statement that IWMI will seek collaboration and participation; how this will be operationalized is not explained. One would also expect to see reference to the potential synergies with other CGIAR centers and various national initiatives, for examples those targeting the five national governments listed in the overall goal statement (p. 18). While the components of its institutional and partnership comparative advantages are identified (p. 8), IWMI's areas of core competence and how IWMI's work fits into a global water and agriculture agenda are not well described in the Plan. The Center presents its comparative advantage primarily in an institutional context and not in terms of specific types of water related research and issues, i.e., in terms of the substance of the research. More articulation on the potential role of IWMI as a policy oriented center would be needed.

The priority themes chosen are appropriate for IWMI, although it would help if the proposed linkages were more clearly stated, e.g., working with urban waste water for irrigation and the health implications of such. The 12 sub-themes include several areas where IWMI appears to already be a leader and understands the research opportunities (e.g., sub themes 1.1, 2.1, 2.2, 3.2). Other sub-themes, where IWMI's comparative advantage is not evident or described, seem to be more aspirational. Are subthemes 1.3, 2.3, 3.1, 4.1 and 4.2 researchable with IWMI's present capacity? Does IWMI have (or intend to have) the capacity to deal with the broader environmental issues as described? Would investments in building capacity in this domain yield impacts in excess of those that would be obtained by investing more in existing areas of core competence? These are questions IWMI may like to explore further in the strategic plan. The sub-theme on Water Economics (4.2) would seem to be a priority area for IWMI but the presentation is rather general and there is no reference to payment for environmental services (PES) or to the large volumes of work on this that have been undertaken by the World Bank and others.

The discussion of choice of geographic focus related to specific themes is limited. While one can deduce from the institutional structure of IWMI that Asia and Africa will continue to be the main focus for most of its work, a sharper and more narrowed geographic focus may be needed

Response to changing needs and capacities of NARS

The strategic plan has a good discussion of current and emerging trends related to land and water management and policy. The changing environment is identified, and several of the themes deal with emerging concerns, e.g., relationship between global change and water, and the emergence of problems and opportunities related to urban waste water and health. All of the emerging priorities appear to be adequately reflected in the strategy.

IWMI sees itself responding to needs with a multi-pronged approach: focus on local needs while working with national level policy makers on enabling conditions for local progress, responding to locally/nationally identified needs while also intending “... to be proactive and advocate innovative methods of dealing with the world’s water crisis that our donors may wish to consider investing in and our stakeholders adopting.” Responding to the existing and changing capacities of NARS is also a high priority in the strategic plan and three broad approaches to such are outlined in the Plan. The importance of impact on the ground – meeting the actual needs of countries and local communities is taken very seriously in the Strategic Plan. Thus, it is stressed that: “The most critical challenge for IWMI over the next five years is to ensure that our research output has impact.” All in all, there is a good and fairly detailed discussion on this topic and the means to ensure good impact.

Capacity building is stated as an intention but there is not enough information about how this will be achieved. It is expected that the research would be conducted through a series of strategic alliances in geographic areas, but this should be explicitly stated.

Research alliances and partnerships

The Plan discusses partnerships and roles of partners only in a very general sense and there is little in the way of specifics provided under the discussion of the four themes and 12 subthemes. Nowhere in the document does one find a discussion of the strategic approach of IWMI to partnerships, although it is stated that IWMI intends to rely heavily on partnerships to get its objectives met and generate impact from its research. Particularly notable is the absence of discussion of partnerships with other CGIAR centers and Challenge Programs. Yet the potential to work with CIAT, ICRAF, CIFOR and others (such as the CP on climate change in Subtheme 1.3) would seem to provide a strong element of comparative advantage to IWMI in dealing with the “bigger-picture” issues that it aspires to address.

IWMI has a good reputation in terms of its partnering. Thus, it would have been useful for the Plan to have a more detailed discussion of such partnerships, and particularly a discussion of the partnering strategies and criteria that the Center intends to use, including how they will be chosen and prioritized in moving towards the goals of the Center.

Process used in developing the Strategic Plan

The process followed in developing the strategic plan is only briefly mentioned, i.e., it “builds on IWMI’s previous plan (2004–2008), an external review of IWMI (2007) and the results of the Comprehensive Assessment of Water Management in Agriculture... [and] ... places emphasis on what donors, stakeholders and partners consider the most pressing water problems.” But the strategic and analytical processes used in moving from concerns of stakeholders to specific priority research themes and subthemes on which IWMI will work during the Plan period are not discussed.