

## **ISDC feedback summarizing comments from independent reviewers and the Funder Gender Experts on the ENGAGE proposal**

### **Summary**

*The reviewers were generally positive about the proposal although there was disappointment at the lack of critical reflection of the work done to date. Doubts were expressed about the proposed platform's ability to "influence". The Funder Gender Experts expressed gratitude to the team for their hard work in putting the proposal together.*

### **1. Relevance**

#### **1.1 Alignment, value addition, demand**

This Platform's three strategic objectives—strengthen, catalyze, influence—are aligned with the current CRPs. The proposal is clear about how cross-CRP collaboration is envisioned to take place and how it would reach the CGIAR end users with research and capacity development. It is less clear how that will translate to culture change, which is the ultimate aim. The proposal does not claim or present evidence of demand from CRPs or existing platforms.

The proposal explains clearly and in detail how collaboration will work, building on past work. The approach is essentially more of the same, recognizing that much good quality research has been done so far. It does not reflect on lessons learned and on why past good research has not led to sustained change nor how this can be achieved in the future.

#### **1.2 Comparative and competitive advantage of CGIAR and partners and ability to deliver on the core objectives of the platform.**

The proposal does a good job summarizing the current, cross-cutting gender research themes and their importance for the CGIAR and global gender research community. Annex 3a outlines the socially relevant research questions undertaken in the PIM Flagship (FP) as well as approaches to conducting the research.

The presentation of the state of the art in gender research, tools and policy influence is limited, and mostly self-referenced. There are some references to the PIM FP but the proposal lacks thorough analysis of the lessons learned from the FP experience for the Platform. CGIAR and the ENGAGE lead center, IFPRI, have undoubtedly produced a significant amount of empirical evidence of why gender matters. They have also delivered relevant technology, made

management recommendations, and provided input that influenced policy. It should be noted that similar results, evidence and recommendations have also been produced by other agencies, including many national programs.

The ability of the CGIAR to have the comparative advantage of delivering on the core platform objectives will be conditional on the nature of its partnership with its stakeholders as well as other external agencies. Without making any significant changes to the proposed partnership model, the platform would have good likelihood to deliver on its first two objectives – build the capacity (strengthen) and to deliver research results (catalyze). In its current partnership model, delivering on the third objective (influence) is less certain.

### **1.3 Appropriate choice of partners**

IFPRI – the lead center for this proposed platform– has assembled strong gender research capacity from across CGIAR with each partner bringing its own area of expertise, especially in its science capacity, and its own external partnerships. The choice of partners is appropriate for the platform structure. Having IFPRI as a lead center and AWARD as the lead for capacity strengthening makes good sense.

Expanding collaboration to include KIT, SEWA and ISEAL is innovative. External partners offer potential to leverage resources (NL-CGIAR partnership) and to increase chance of impact through development partners. More in-depth discussion on the role of national partners and regional organizations would have been helpful, especially in terms of their contributions to problem definition and agenda setting. Linkages with educational institutions and youth organizations would also have been helpful.

The case for basing the platform at Bioversity in Rome in order to link with UN Rome-based agencies is not convincing, as is discussed below under sub-criterion 3.1.

## **2. Scientific Credibility**

### **2.1 The credibility of the team**

The ENGAGE team is a very solid, qualified set of researchers, as reflected in their publication records and experiences. ENGAGE staff have already implemented the PIM gender FP, demonstrating they can deliver on proposed activities.

The proposal articulates how the expertise of the team will be applied. However, while the CGIAR staff who will be in the Steering Committee are indicated, details are lacking on who from the proposing Centers will be engaged in implementing the platform.

## **2.2 Mechanisms for assuring the quality of data and of science, their storing and sharing**

The proposal includes mechanisms for ensuring quality of data and science. The proposed role of Science Leaders to take decisions on research themes will likely increase the credibility of gender science and interest by other CGIAR researchers.

ENGAGE describes the steps (Annex 4) and mechanisms that will allow curation of data as well as access to data by the research community. Data sharing will allow verification of the results, which will be important for the third objective of the platform – “influence”. If the platform research findings are expected to influence policy, they need to be verifiable. Proposed open access will also improve gender science as it will encourage greater scrutiny of the data collection methods and analysis.

## **2.3 Credibility of the proposed outputs**

The proposal provides a clearly articulated impact pathway and includes strategies to ensure the credibility of proposed outputs and to enhance their use with the CGIAR. ENGAGE has deliberately chosen to work through CGIAR Science Leaders and will have a rigorous review of collaborative research with peer review as part of process. Although well conceptualized and logical, the proposal lacks newness and innovation. It does not appear to push the envelope of doing things differently. It proposes to approach gender issues using the familiar path taken for the last several decades, with a firm foundation in the belief that more evidence, tools and capacity building can lead to policy changes, and that CGIAR research can influence national policies. Given the lack of real traction in overcoming gender-related inequalities and injustices, such thinking should be questioned, and traditional impact pathways should be challenged. ENGAGE does not appear to do this in a systematic way.

## **3. Legitimacy**

### **3.1 Governance and management**

The proposal has a sound governance structure. The proposed management structure is, however, complex. In seeking to be inclusive—for example, a large Steering Committee, a distribution of management between Platform director and AWARD—it may have become too broad. Frequent management meetings should promote more timely decision-making.

The creation of the secretariat in Rome does not seem cost-effective. Strategic, periodic contact with the donors and Rome-based organizations could be more efficient than the constant presence of an office. The likelihood that the Rome-based secretariat would be able to catalyze significant funds or collaboration from other Rome-based agencies was seen as low. Perhaps a better approach could be to seek alternative ways of collaboration with Rome-based agencies via collaborative capacity building, data sharing and research opportunities, directly under capacity lead (AWARD) or the lead center (IFPRI).

### **3.2 Engagement with stakeholders is based on a principled and value-driving model that embraces true diversity as a key enabler of functional agri-food systems.**

This proposal includes evidence of engagement with national partners and partner programs. IFPRI and other Centers all now have a track record of working with national partners. The proposal has thoroughly identified the Platform's stakeholders, but analyzing their different contributions and needs, as well as prioritizing stakeholders is limited. Having a thorough stakeholder analysis would help drive and explain the stakeholder engagement plan better. Youth and educational institutions were somewhat overlooked in the stakeholder identification process.

ENGAGE has a strong communications strategy, but mainly describes what will flow from the platform to the stakeholders. The Platform's stakeholders, internal and external, are generally well identified though the analysis and prioritization of their needs could be stronger. What this diverse pool of stakeholders can contribute (engagement plan) is not considered in detail.

## **4. Effectiveness**

### **4.1 Strengthening of CGIAR delivery on gender equality research**

The proposal makes a strong case for its ability to act as a convener across the system on gender research and presents a strong vision for how to improve gender monitoring and reporting across the system. However, ENGAGE's proposed M&E plan for its own activities is weak. ENGAGE does not outline how gender thinking across the CGIAR system can be better embedded or measured.

### **4.2 Global leadership with transformative impacts**

The ENGAGE proposal describes several means of including and reaching out to the broader international community of gender researchers in agricultural research. The team includes global research leaders with an impressive list of accomplishments in research and policy influence, and a track record of delivering capacity development programs. While these efforts have been successful in terms of improving how gender analysis is done, the proposal does not make the case that they have been transformative. The word 'transformative' is used throughout the documentation for this Platform, and in the responses to the call. Yet, the reviewers found the ENGAGE proposal unconvincing in terms of its real transformative potential.

The emphasis on this Platform having direct access to UN and other agencies with global responsibilities based in Rome is appropriate. However, this linkage is also important for the agencies themselves and no doubt all CGIAR Centers and programs are important players in the agencies achieving their global responsibilities. Therefore, an actual physical presence in Rome is not essential to the establishment of good working relations with these agencies.

NARS forums will build understanding of how gender affects priorities in technology development, and how gender equality contributes to the SDGs. This will promote systematic consideration of gender relevance in research priorities and allocation of resources for gender-responsive research but again, this is not evidently transformative in any broader sense.

The application did not elaborate on the lessons learned from the past, and the effectiveness of CGIAR efforts to interact with the global community of gender researchers. Gender research needs to move from devising to implementing solutions. It tends to focus on problems, sometimes on solutions, but rarely on implementation. There is often misunderstanding as to what type of knowledge is needed for implementation. It is problematic to preference “high-quality journal publications,” over practical knowledge and the associated ethical and political problem domain. Practical knowledge is embedded, developed over the years, and difficult to define. The ENGAGE team has demonstrated the commitment to the action-oriented research, but without fully overcoming linear thinking (i.e., that the research should come first and generate the impact), although we know that the impact emerges from many influences. Hence, in order to have truly transformative gender impacts, a more multi-faceted approach to change is needed, one that transcends current thinking and approaches.

In summary, the reviewers agree on the ability of the team to be research leaders, but the proposal fails to explain how this leadership, which in a sense it already has, will be used to achieve transformative impacts. Closing evidence gaps, on its own, is unlikely to be transformative.

## **5. Budgets**

The budget seems, on the surface, to be reasonable, equitably distributed, and in line with the proposed work. More information would be needed to assess cost effectiveness.