

STAP's comments on the Targeted Research (TR) Proposal:

‘Combating Desertification in South Asia: the Agriculture-Environment Nexus’

This proposal explores the links between agriculture and the environment and seeks to find ways to make agricultural development both environmentally sustainable and remunerative to the poor in three target areas seriously affected by land degradation in South Asia. Viewed from the perspective of potential contributions it can make to knowledge and sustainable management of drylands, the proposal appears valuable and useful. Apparently, considerable stakeholder consultations were undertaken in the process of developing the proposal and the partnership put together to implement the project looks good and capable of executing a targeted research (TR) project. **However, the main problem with the proposal as presented now is that it is not framed as a TR.** The problem arises partly because of flaws in the conceptualization of the research issues and partly due to the way the proposal has been presented and lack of clarity on the different types of research that might be conducted under the proposed project. It is pertinent that the proposal is being reviewed at the beginning of the PDF-B stage as this provides an opportunity for revising and turning it into a truly TR project. As it stands right now, there are a number of problems with the proposal which are explained below.

1. The TR features of the proposal have not been convincingly demonstrated. The proposal reads in part like a regular GEF-funded project aimed at redressing land degradation. Attention has not been focused on identifying real knowledge gaps and how these gaps could be addressed through TR. Although there are passing references in the proposal to new knowledge, tools and methods that can contribute to sustainable land management (SLM), these are not demonstrated as outcomes of a scientific enquiry or research process.
2. For a TR proposal, a fundamental problem is that the ‘overarching’ hypothesis and many of the sub-hypotheses stated are too vague and non-specific and, therefore, not testable. Furthermore, these hypotheses should ideally address knowledge gaps that have been identified but this is not the case in the proposal. For example, the overarching hypothesis is that ‘more sustainable ways can be found to simultaneously protect/rehabilitate threatened dryland environments and enhance livelihoods of the poor who live there’. This is the goal of the project rather than a hypothesis. Even if this statement were taken to be a hypothesis, without defining the main variables in it (i.e. indicating how sustainable land management and livelihoods will be measured) a research question cannot be framed, thus making it difficult to understand and replicate the research. Tightening up the hypotheses and making them very specific and providing good operational definitions will allow the reader to determine whether what is being proposed is a confirmatory or an exploratory research and, more importantly, allow the verification of certain statements and outcomes that presently appear improbable. Thus, for the sake of argument if the overarching hypothesis is taken to be a genuine hypothesis, by providing some indicators of sustainable land management (e.g. increased total factor productivity) and enhanced livelihoods (e.g. some measures of improved welfare measures such as increased incomes or

- consumption of high quality diets) a basis is provided for ascertaining whether the proposed methods (e.g. ecosystem approach) do lead, indeed, to improved outcomes with respect to land management and livelihoods.
3. As stated above, it is unclear in some instances whether what is being proposed is confirmatory or exploratory research. But this distinction matters in determining whether the outcome of the research is filling an information gap or adding to knowledge and to demonstrate a clear understanding of processes and outcomes. For instance, on page 19 it is stated that ‘diversification into higher value crop and livestock products and systems is both ecologically and socio-economically beneficial. Such systems do not mine soils of nutrients and deplete them of organic matter’. Without prior research that proves this statement is true in all 3 target areas, exploratory research will be needed since it is not in all cases that diversification into higher value crops and livestock leads to sustainable land management and better livelihoods. Confirmatory research may also be needed given the situation- and context-specific nature of desertification and its drivers, particularly with the plan further down the page to plant ‘tree-shrub-grass intercrops’. New plant varieties will obviously need to be evaluated to determine their suitability to the environment in the target areas. Without clearly separating these different processes and indicating what type of research is envisaged in each situation, the proposal will remain unconvincing as a TR and will give the impression that the proponents are glossing over important scientific and technical issues.
 4. In the proposal, there appears to be some confusion between improving productivity and sustainability of rainfed agriculture; and issues of restoring degraded lands/wasteland development. While the two may be related at a basic, scientific level, in actual practice, the institutional, organizational and social issues surrounding both are quite different. Recognizing and clarifying the difference would be helpful.
 5. Some of the proposed activities relate more to capacity building than TR. For instance, as part of the NAP, Pakistan has emphasized the need for technical cooperation on remote sensing, early warning assessment, management of information systems and impact assessment – this would be capacity building and not a TR.
 6. Carbon sequestration appears to be an add-on in the proposal. While it is certainly the case that afforestation of degraded lands might be attractive in carbon terms, since the emphasis of the proposal appears to be on agriculture, it is unclear how this objective will be achieved. Furthermore, a number of assertions are made which, unless better explanations are provided, will be hard to justify. An example concerns the assertion that carbon sequestration in the target areas can be used for carbon trading. Relevant questions are who will buy it and under what mechanism/market? Without answers to questions like these, false hopes about a marketable commodity will be raised.
 7. The proposal in certain instances includes generalizations and simplistic formulations. For example, the migration referred to in the proposal is usually to urban areas within the same country, rather than to developed

- countries, given that the population in the target areas is mostly made up of poor, low-skilled workers. While there is no question that this leads to significant social stresses within these countries; it is perhaps an exaggeration to say that these lead to “global” social stresses.
8. Given the implied intention in the proposal to extrapolate findings and make them useful to other dryland areas, how do the areas and regions selected for the project constitute a "representative sample"? This will have to be brought out in relation to the research hypotheses being developed and examined in the proposal.
 9. In terms of presentation, the way the 3 main components of a TR, i.e. i) research hypothesis, ii) explanation of how the results of the research project will contribute to the objectives of existing OPs and, iii) establishing incrementality by describing the baseline, are tucked into the annex gives the impression that the TR components are an add-on to a proposal initially designed as a regular GEF-funded project. The 3 components should appear much earlier in the proposal and be blended appropriately with the rest of the narrative.

In conclusion, the proposal contains good ideas that could be reformulated and presented as a TR. The partnership put together to implement the project is capable of undertaking a TR that will improve our understanding of SLM and make important contributions to the design and execution of future GEF-funded projects. The proposal should be revised based on the points raised here to make it qualify as a TR. STAP stands ready to provide necessary advice and work with the GEF Secretariat and UNEP to turn this proposal into a TR if requested.