

SANREM CRSP Technical Committee minutes

May 28, 2008, Los Baños, Philippines

Participants

Elinor Ostrom, Indiana University
Alex Travis, Cornell University
Jeffrey Alwang, Virginia Tech
Corinne Valdivia, University of Missouri
Manuel Reyes, North Carolina A&T
Elizabeth Jiménez, Universidad de La Cordillera
Shirley Tarawali, ILRI
S.K. De Datta (ex officio), Virginia Tech
Michael Bertelsen (ex officio), Virginia Tech
Theo Dillaha (ex officio), Virginia Tech
Keith Moore (ex officio), Virginia Tech
Maria Elisa Christie, Virginia Tech

Action items

1. Election of TC chair
2. ME guidance on year-end fiscal issues
3. Template for research and policy briefs
4. New board member

Agenda items

The meeting was called to order at 11:40 a.m. by Manuel Reyes, who thanked the group for the opportunity to serve as acting chair as well as for having chosen the Philippines for the SANREM CRSP annual meeting site.

Election of TC chair

Reyes called for nominations for the new chair of the Technical Committee and moved that Gerald Shively be reelected. Alex Travis seconded the nomination. Corinne Valdivia asked for clarification on the role of the chair. Program Director Theo Dillaha said those would not change. S.K. De Datta added that the duties are outlined in the SANREM CRSP Policies and Procedures Manual. Shively was unanimously reelected.

Host country partners report

Elizabeth Jiménez gave an update on host country partner issues based on the group's first meeting, held May 26 in Los Baños. The meeting, attended by 19 host country researchers, was short but successful. Dillaha agreed that it was an excellent session and noted that some of the researchers who have been involved since the beginning have requested supplemental training on developing proposals and putting together budgets to better compete for potential funding. This would be a good addition for future meetings. Shirley Tarawali raised the issue of continued engagement. Jiménez stated that the group had not developed a plan since it had met only once, two days earlier. For future stages, a strategy is in place to start a dynamic through the listserv so that members can identify what the next phases will be and possibly elect a TC representative. Valdivia said these discussions are important in targeting key areas in which specific initiatives could move forward. She also mentioned the need to strengthen capacities and publications, and to engage host countries as collaborators. Reyes asked about the possibility of appointing somebody from his research team. Dillaha pointed out that they are already on the listserv. Jiménez encouraged the group to keep offering ideas to identify specific ways to continue the momentum

of the various projects. Travis asked if a team room could be created on the website for identifying resources and serving as a permanent repository. Dillaha reminded the group that the SANREM Management Entity (ME) had offered to provide such a tool. Concerns raised in Jiménez's report were the need to contribute to host countries' research capacities, including high academic standards; and the need for direct translations of work being done for local journals. She proposed publication of one book following a seminar where all researchers, including the U.S. academic team, would present their results. Conferences, seminars, and classes given by the team of researchers in host countries should be a key activity, as should greater and more effective participation in the design process of each project for Phase IV.

AMR review, SANREM CRSP renewal process and timeline

Michael Bertelsen gave an update of the Administrative Management Review (AMR) and SANREM CRSP renewal process and timeline, noting that the consensus among USAID personnel is that SANREM will be extended. He said SPARE is not authorized to make an "up or down" vote and is empowered only to review the proposal. Dillaha said USAID has indicated it will ask the SANREM ME for an extension proposal. De Datta said the agency likely will reveal some of the features to be included in the new phase. However, the ME is hindered in writing a proposal by a shortage of contract officers, delaying the process. Responding to a question from Valdivia, De Datta said the ME cannot describe the extension proposal exactly but can give general ideas. Dillaha said other CRSP directors have been asking him similar questions, for no one else has gone through the process; his impression is that it is to be much smaller in scope than the original proposal submitted at the beginning of the current phase. Critical items would be the vision and the general description of the methodology in creating and carrying out the projects. Dillaha said BIFAD will meet in mid-June and with a presentation from SPARE; at this point, the ME might receive oral notification of an extension. Jeffrey Alwang asked that, to facilitate planning for the following year, confirmation of the extension be communicated to all project partners as quickly as possible. De Datta said the program as a whole should be planned for the next five years, and he emphasized the importance of contingency planning. He predicted that the issue will be resolved by September. Dillaha reiterated his view that notification of an extension would be made by June 2008. Valdivia expressed concerns that the long-term projects' leaders be well informed about the process for the second phase and how it would affect current projects, including knowledge whether they would be competing on equal footing.

EEP perspective, ME response

Dillaha said the External Evaluation Panel (EEP) has been inactive since completing the EEP report January. Dillaha noting that putting together the EEP team was the most difficult thing he had ever done due to the challenge of getting appropriate expertise without having conflicts of interest. Valdivia said that it was critical that reviewers look at the projects from several perspectives, not only their own expertise. Dillaha agreed, expressing disappointment that the lead reviewers did not have more input from other members of the panel on specific activities.

Alwang said it is inappropriate for Paul Vlek to serve on the EEP in the future because of his personal involvement in SANREM sponsored research in West Africa and proposed that he be removed to avoid a possible conflict of interest. De Datta responded that, though there may indeed be a perceived conflict, it would be detrimental to remove him from the EEP, for his work and contributions are quite valuable. Valdivia said the EEP's role is to remain separate from the long-term research projects, thus the possibility of one of the members doing research does bring present a conflict of interest. Dillaha and De Datta both assured the group that will take all necessary precautions to ensure that no conflict occurs. Dillaha praised the group for providing excellent responses to the review. Tarawali said that, while the review was impressive and detailed, it was not as forward-looking as it could have been. De Datta said not all recommendations have to be accepted; it is necessary only to document all work that is done. Valdivia said parts of the review were useful, but a better understanding of budget constraints by the

reviewers would be beneficial. She said that review materials provided to the EEP were not designed to describe the SANREM science and subsequently required detailed explanations that resulted in a large transaction cost. She expressed frustration that this process occurred while research was ongoing and that the reviewers lacked the shared vision of the researchers, which detracted from the usefulness of the process. De Datta thanked her for her feedback but reminded the group that they operate under USAID guidelines, so any deviation would have produced a review with vastly different results. Valdivia said she understood the process but that it conflicted with the timing of the work researchers were hoping to accomplish. Travis agreed that it was a stressful procedure that prevented him from publishing information, and he asked that such conflicts be avoided in the next phase, adding that, if not for the exceptional support of the director of his institute, he would not have been able to participate and noting that other people were similarly affected. Dillaha said the ME's requests could have been better structured and that in hindsight there was a discrepancy between the stated requirements, the desired outcomes, and the results; he apologized for the confusion. Alwang said a competitively bid proposal should not be restructured a mere year and a half later to accommodate suggestions from a review panel. De Datta responded that working with USAID requires flexibility but acknowledged the need to change the process to decrease the pressure and improve the timing of the review. Dillaha noted the review occurred one year earlier than he had anticipated, just as projects were getting started and that this was poor timing.

Travis raised several questions regarding the reports and the differences in requirements by the ME and by USAID. He said this meeting highlighted the risk of summary statements and how that can cause bad feelings, particularly in discussions of trip reports. De Datta said USAID requires trip reports within 30 days and that, despite time constraints and busy schedules, it should not be difficult to comply. Valdivia thanked the ME for buffering the PIs from the excessive details of USAID information; though some are useful, they need not be published. Keith Moore said a report template has been created with useful features to produce a document that can be quickly read, especially with the executive summary at the beginning of the article. Dillaha said the longer reports provide a better source of information to prepare for unanticipated inquiries. Valdivia summarized the discussion by stating the group's common desire: to communicate better what each project is about.

Phase IV planning

Alwang said he believes that at the end of Phase IV in 2014, USAID will require recompetition of all SANREM research awards but that it will not be necessary in 2009 and that existing projects should be continued and/or that significant reductions be made to the competitive bids process in order to be more effective. Several members of the group agreed. Dillaha reviewed the history of the process and speculated competition in 2009 will be necessary because of new USAID directives for Phase IV, for example a specific allocation to the Initiative to End Hunger in Africa or for biodiversity. He reminded the group that they currently have a 40 percent earmark for biodiversity, and that there might also be an earmark for soils research because of the termination of the Soils CRSP. Tarawali asked about the level of funding. De Datta said it is \$2.4 million annually. Travis asked for further details about the biodiversity earmarks. Dillaha said that we have no information from USAID at this point about Phase IV earmarks/directives and that he would provide them as they become available..

Bertelsen said the uncertainty of the political situation in Washington is affecting foreign aid and consequently requires flexibility. The hope is to expand funds available for agriculture and natural resource management by piquing the interest of the decision-makers. He said De Datta has clearly outlined what must be done: The only way to proceed is to anticipate a closeout in 2009 but plan for bridging opportunities leading into a new phase. De Datta restated that official notification of project extension should arrive by June and thanked everyone for the hard work that resulted in a good review. Valdivia raised concerns about the effects of discussing the possibility of project closure with the partners involved. Moore said the purpose is interaction and adaptation along with stakeholders, USAID being the No. 1 among those. He urged the group to look at the situation as an opportunity that requires learning

how to communicate effectively. He emphasized that the USAID Missions must be consulted to learn their concerns and priorities and to demonstrate the interest of all participating institutions. Dillaha said preparing for several different scenarios would enable the projects to move more quickly. Several participants mentioned a lack of direction regarding the desired outcomes of their projects. Reyes said one difficulty is ascertaining what results are expected, besides books and publications. Valdivia said she often felt she found herself back at ground zero and would appreciate advice on how to proceed. Tarawali offered several suggestions, such as thinking about the content of the project, the needs of the stakeholders, what kind of products might be needed, a range of scenarios for the future, and key outputs.

SANREM ME – AMR Report

Valdivia asked for a summary of the results of February's AMR. Dillaha said the review team visited Penn State and North Carolina A&T, and in general thought the ME was doing a good job. Valdivia expressed concerns about end-of-year financial matters, such as final billing, encumbrances, and pipeline. A discussion followed, after which the ME agreed to address the questions raised and expressed willingness to work with individuals to answer questions and resolve problems.

New business

Policy briefs

Regarding policy briefs and notes, Moore stated that more could be done in packaging policy briefs, which are new. Valdivia said policy briefs are key to host countries and asked if there is a mechanism for translation. Moore said there is no language restriction – briefs can be written in Spanish, but he will review only those composed in English. Dillaha said it would be beneficial to publish in multiple languages. Moore said policy briefs and notes, as well as research briefs and notes, could be in targeted languages when appropriate. Alwang asked about the possibility of ME support in writing policy briefs. Moore said the current model is not very efficient and is relatively problematic, but this could be facilitated by providing a draft of any technical material. Alwang said writing is more effective when done by someone with an eye for the target audience. Valdivia agreed, adding that the policy institute at University of Missouri works with researchers to create appropriate papers. She emphasized the importance of being an effective communicator of science. Moore discussed the value of teamwork; for example, he is a sociologist and Dillaha is an engineer. The differing perspectives can be a useful tool, but someone must first provide a draft that is concise and to the point. Valdivia suggested that a template be created that can be used for a brief, with guidelines for target audiences. Moore agreed to take the idea under consideration. Jiménez encouraged the group to brainstorm for effective mechanisms aimed at specifically disseminating information in host countries.

Leveraged funding

Moore recommended that the more documentation is provided on leveraged funding, the better it is for the CRSP, for it is recognized as significant by USAID.

SANREM Knowledgebase

Moore updated the group on a new SANREM Knowledgebase address with which participants can work. If anyone did not receive the e-mail containing the information and the USAID logo from Jennifer Lamb, he offered to forward it.

Annual report

Valdivia requested that the category “graduate short modules” be added to the annual report. Moore suggested that the 2007 annual report be reviewed and used as a model; the long-term training tables in that edition were exemplary and could be updated for current usage.

New board member

The group agreed that the selection of a new SANREM CRSP board member be addressed by email.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:10 p.m.