



Action plan following assessment report Research 2018 - 2022

**Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WC DI)
Wageningen Economic Research (WEcR)**

July 2024

1 Preface

The research assessment of WCDI and WEcR took place in November 2023, during four intense days with many meetings between the committee, our staff and some of our partners. The outcome of the assessment was unfortunately delayed as the committee's secretary withdrew during preparations of the report and presented to us in June 2024. In this document we will present our action plan related to the 19 recommendations for both institutes as well as the merger of both institutes into Wageningen Social & Economic Research (WSER).

We truly thank the committee for their valued efforts during the review, the interesting discussions as well as for writing down their findings. We were given the opportunity to check the draft report for any factual inaccuracies or misunderstandings, which we reported to the committee chair.

We are very pleased that the committee acknowledged the performance of WEcR with an excellent analysis and very high scores. We signalled not one factual error in that text, also the recommendations are appreciated, to the point and very useful. However, the assessment scores of WCDI were disappointing and we concluded that the analysis was not fully according to guidelines. We hoped the review report would indicate improvement opportunities for WCDI as done, but also emphasize the strengths of WCDI and show especially the societal impact WCDI has always made with their "knowledge for impact" strategy. As this was the first time in history for WCDI to have a full review (now also including scientific quality), we hoped the committee would – as intended by the review protocol - foremost take the progress, the development of the last 4 years, as an important consideration in the assessment. The assessment given by the committee, however, seems focussed on WCDI's performance against very recent global changes in development collaboration with main emphasis on realised equal partnerships leaving out other important indicators. The committee chair acknowledged this fact, but also concluded it was – 6 months later - not possible anymore to rejoin the complete committee to re-assess the scores given. As a result, some text was reformulated, but no score was changed. Of course, we respect this. Having said this, we fully acknowledge and appreciate the valuable recommendations given and will focus on those in the next strategic period.

Regarding the recommendations for the merger and our specific questions posed to the committee, we conclude we are well under way. The merger process goes well, we have multiple working groups taking steps in developing the new organisation, alignment of daily management and ways of working, culture activities to get to know each other, and we are also arriving at a unified strategy with one knowledge agenda and a set of clearly defined strategic themes and related programs. In that sense, we could state that we have already adhered to the committee's recommendations for the integrated institute.

Once again thanks to the committee for their valuable work and especially the recommendations for both institutes as well as the merger. In the rest of this document, we will present our action plan with 25 actions defined. Note that some of the actions concerning WCDI and WEcR are of the same nature; we will bring them together in a condensed action list for the new institute WSER when we first report on the progress to the Executive Board next year.

Kind regards, Prof. dr Jack van der Vorst
Managing Director Social Sciences Group

2 Assessment Wageningen Centre for Development Innovation (WCDI)

Management WCDI	Ir. H. Bruggeman
Research input scientific staff 2022	82 fte (102 persons)
Research expenditure in 2022	13.588 K€
Assessment:	
Research Quality	2.5 (satisfactory to good)
Relevance to Society	2.5 (satisfactory to good)
Viability	2 (satisfactory)

Based on the assessment of WCDI and the recommendations of the committee, the following responses and proposed actions have been formulated. In our response we have combined the recommendations that are aligned.

Recommendations 1 - 7

- **The committee encourages WCDI to accomplish further growth in the number of peer-reviewed publications and engage staff in academic publishing.**
- **The committee underlines the necessity of KB funds for developing the Knowledge Agenda, disseminate research results, and develop knowledge sharing with partnership institutes in the South.**

Response	<p>In focusing on its identity as a knowledge partner since 2020 in response to the previous 2019 visitation, WCDI has already been putting in place the necessary support and framework that encourages the creation of knowledge products, including peer-reviewed publications. The data shows an encouraging increase in peer-reviewed publications in 2021 and 2022. We therefore appreciate that this recommendation reinforces the priority we have been investing in as an institution.</p> <p>Over the past 2 years, WCDI had new access to KB funds to further build its knowledge agenda. This has been very helpful in contributing to the body of knowledge products, including peer reviewed journal articles. We appreciate the committee's support for this.</p>
Actions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. WCDI will continue to position itself as relevant research and knowledge partner, and will further develop the Knowledge Agenda, with explicit attention to peer reviewed journal articles. We will connect this to new KB 2025-2028 programming to ensure funding. We will strive to co-create knowledge products in close collaboration with our partners in the Global South. 2. As of January 2025, WCDI and WEcR will join forces in WSER. For WCDI this will provide (among others) the opportunity to actively join and work with the WEcR Senior Scientists to formulate a joint academic publication plan for period 2025-2028 that draws on both domains of expertise. We will pursue the acquisition of EU Horizon projects as these are especially important to further build the (academic) knowledge profile of our organisation. In our acquisition processes we will seek to ensure the possibility for at least one annual academic publication in each project. We will set up a mentoring/buddying programme to support younger/less experienced colleagues in their writing ambitions and skills. Having an increasing number of staff with a PhD, will help in this.

Recommendations 2 - 3

- **The committee advises WCDI to develop a strategy to increase the number of staff members from the Global South at all levels of the organisation, including top-management.**
- **WCDI is advised to put incentives and facilities in place to encourage staff, especially from the Global South, to expand their academic careers and performance.**

Response	The advice to put incentives and facilities to encourage staff members from the Global South to further pursue their academic careers is well heard and embraced. WCDI already has the highest institutional percentage of staff members from the Global South in WUR. Given our expertise and continued focus on partnerships with institutes in countries in the South we continue to adhere to this ambition encouraged by the review committee. Services are available to facilitate immigration procedures of new WUR staff, including of WCDI. Yet we can always do more and better.
Actions	<p>3. WCDI will continue to explicitly recruit among candidates from the Global South and give preference to such candidates in case of equal qualifications. We will make sure that all job opportunities at WCDI are actively promoted through our partners and networks in the Global South.</p> <p>4. In addition, we provide incentives and possibilities for professional development to all staff but will take extra care that we do so for staff from the Global South. Specific action will be taken in coaching and mentoring for them.</p>

Recommendation 4. The committee advises to create smaller expertise clustered teams in order to provide staff with a 'home'.

Response	<p>Since 2023, after the review period, WCDI has been precisely working on this: the creation of Thematic Clusters and teams. This development fell outside the time frame of the review and therefore could not formally be considered.</p> <p>The purpose of the clusters is for colleagues to connect around common interests in a structure manner, creating a content base. The teams are organised and lead by Thematic Cluster leaders to encourage a sense of 'community within the wider WCDI community'. We welcome the review committee's recommendation that confirms the correctness of this chosen path.</p>
Actions	5. In the new institution, working in smaller teams will continue to be an organisational principle . Therefore the recommendation will be built into the emerging institutional structure.

Recommendation 5. The committee advises WCDI to consistently monitor the satisfaction of partners and donors in its projects.

Response	We acknowledge that as a research institute we have an obligation to provide verifiable evidence of the efficacy of our work. Until 2018 WCDI was ISO certified, dropping this as only 1 donor had ever asked for external verification as part of their due diligence. This was not replaced by a structured process of monitoring and learning.
Actions	6. Wageningen Research has been piloting a joint Client Satisfaction system , that is rolled out per institute and has 'own' questions, yet has recognizable elements over the various institutes. WCDI intends to join this system as from late 2024/2025. In addition, we will also draw on our internal expertise – for which we are hired in – to further refine this system into an appropriate, robust monitoring system that will report to the future Institute Managers and Directors of SSG.

Recommendation 6. The committee recommends to set up a 'Global South Partnership Centre' in WCDI to:

- a. manage and facilitate the intended equal partnership strategy, to be considered as 'hardware' for WCDI.**
- b. enforce the 'One Wageningen' agenda in order to realise a unified and coordinated business development.**

Response	We are grateful the committee also attaches importance to a longer-term ambition of WCDI, to structurally rethink and work on how WCDI and WUR undertake partnerships across the world. We continue to see this as a critical part of our future strategy and acknowledge that we have not made the progress intended or hoped for in the last two years.
Actions	<p>7. We intend to develop a number of (equal) partnerships with knowledge institutes in the Global South, jointly pursue projects to collaborate and co-create knowledge, and become the 'to go to' partner for institutes. To coordinate this, we appointed a new Partnership coordinator in 2024, as a follow up to the position we created in 2023, with the remit to further identify what our partnership evolution priorities are.</p> <p>8. We will explore within the context of the new organisation and within the boundaries set by WUR, the possibilities for a Global Partnership Centre @WUR.</p>

Recommendation 8. The committee advises WCDI to analyse its order portfolio and relate this to potential successes in Topsector-, EU- and bilateral contracts.

Response	The advice to diversify the client base of the institute is clearly heard and relevant. Especially the EU and bilateral contracts will offer opportunities for projects relevant to our mandate area. The advice very much aligns with our ambitions to diversify, especially with EU and bilateral clients. Joining forces with WEcR will help us in learning from WEcR's successes in pursuing these markets.
Actions	9. WCDI will analyse its portfolio against the current market and market potential. WCDI will assess chances for success with other markets , up to now not or limited accessed. WCDI will seek the support from WEcR colleagues/learn from their successes in pursuing markets on which WCDI is not yet active.

3 Assessment Wageningen Economic Research (WEcR)

Management WEcR	Ir. O. Hietbrink, business unit manager
Research input scientific staff 2022	286 fte (335 persons)
Research expenditure in 2022	35.294 K€
Assessment:	
Research Quality	3.5 (good to very good)
Relevance to Society	3.5 (good to very good)
Viability	4 (very good)
Statutory Tasks	3.5 (good to very good)

Based on the assessment of WEcR and the recommendations of the committee, the following responses and proposed actions have been formulated.

Recommendation 9. WEcR's actions with respect to research output in publications have been effective and should be expanded.

Response	WEcR has paid special attention to releasing more scientific publications by making strategic choices on themes, capacity and quality of scientific work, establishing a 'publication fund'. Another important development was the establishment of senior scientists as a special role for researchers to work on scientific quality, scientific publications and innovation. WEcR invested in a special professorship, PhD position development on strategic themes (SSG cooperation) and in hiring more staff with PhD. We now explicitly expect researchers to publish when taking part in WUR KB programmes and Horizon Europe. The results have paid off as the number of publications has increased and the impact factor remained high.
Action	<p>10. Continue and enhance the quality of our scientific staff:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. WEcR will continue the special roles of senior scientist to work on scientific quality and to coordinate all the efforts from his/her discipline. The team perspective of senior scientists will be reinforced. b. To enhance scientific quality and enhance cooperation the number of (SSG) Special Professorships will be expanded from 1 to max 4, and some WU-DMW (SSG professor will work 1 day a week for WEcR). c. Hiring staff with PhD and educating WEcR PhDs (to be financed within projects) will be continued, often together with SSG. d. The requirement to publish in scientific journals if one engages in KB and Horizon projects will remain.

Recommendation 10. WEcR is recommended to develop an explicit publication strategy, including on the scientific audience that should be reached, which conferences should be attended, which journals should be targeted, and what contribution to the debate is needed.

Response	WEcR had already an informal publication strategy that was guided by the group of strategic scientist that select e.g. the publications financed in the WEcR publication fund and implicitly by the choice of KB and Horizon projects that require publications. A more explicit publication strategy could make this process more explicit and transparent and enables better prioritizations and knowledge development in new areas.
Actions	<p>11. We will develop an explicit publication strategy, including defining the scientific audience that should be reached, which conferences should be attended, which journals should be targeted, and what contribution to the debate is needed. The publication strategy will be developed with the group of strategic senior scientist in cooperation with Team Leads. The publication strategy needs to be approved by the SMT.</p> <p>12. A publication dashboard will be developed to monitor publications and enables evaluation of the publication strategy.</p>

Recommendation 11. The committee advises WEcR to continuously improve existing models and go further in integrating existing models. This will require innovative improvements to be jointly developed with the WU department of social sciences.

Response	As the world is changing rapidly, so are the challenges faced when modelling agriculture and food systems. The required transitions are not marginal but actual ruptures, and tools available at WEcR (mainly data and economic models) must be adapted to analyse and assess properly the impacts of such significant changes. WEcR's main economic models (in collaboration with international partners) have already been upgraded, including with sustainability simulation and behavioural research results. In terms of the latter, WEcR has invested in cooperation with WU to enhance knowledge about producer and consumer behaviour. Other examples are the SSG cooperation on microeconomic modelling in Horizon projects like <i>Mindstep</i> en <i>AgEnRes</i> , modelling the bioeconomy in Horizon projects like <i>Biomonitor</i> , modelling the safe and just operating space in <i>Brightspace</i> . Furthermore, WEcR models are used in the integrated model frameworks under development of the WUR KB integrated modelling projects.
Actions	In line with external developments and new modelling requirements, WEcR focuses on the further development of models and the data that enables these models. Therefore, WEcR develops two new core programme lines in this area: 13. On the data side the program "Novel data approaches for sector monitoring" will be established. WEcR will integrate different data to cover the safe and just operating space and strengthen investments in data infrastructure by creating a data management system with the Adagio data project. One important development is FADN's transition from focusing on economic data to FSDN (Farm Sustainability Data Network), adopting a much broader focus on sustainability. Data science and artificial intelligence (e.g. data driven analytics and machine learning techniques) will be further developed. 14. On the model side the program "Novel economic models for scenario and trade-off analyses" will be established: the development of the core WEcR models (Farmdyn, MAGNET_GRID, MERIT, AGMEMOD en MAGNET) and their integrations will be covered by the new programme line and it is an explicit area, called scenario analyses, within the WEcR knowledge agenda. Joint development with SSG will be enhanced by collaboration via PhDs, special professorships and cooperation within Horizon projects in the data and modelling fields.

Recommendation 12. WEcR is advised to continue strengthening its relations with the WU (SSG and other Groups) and other research institutes like RIVM, PBL and with research groups at other universities. Many challenges are too big and complex to be solved by a single institute.

Response	Challenges are indeed too big and complex to be solved by a single institute, that is why WUR's strategy is called 'Finding Answers Together'. Therefore, WEcR cooperates with many institutes in the Netherlands, EU and the rest of the world. The Social Sciences Group has become more involved in all of the WUR themes, partly through WUR-wide Knowledge Base and Investment Programmes and partly through the establishment and execution of the " <i>SSG contribution to the WUR strategy (2019-2024)</i> ". Governments and business ask for integral solutions, and WUR as a whole can provide these. The Social Sciences Group and WEcR in particular are therefore increasingly sought-after partners in research projects and are increasingly being asked to complement these with socio-economic information. Outside WUR, there are close connections with PBL (which was part of RIVM in the past) where for example their biophysical (IMAGE) model is coupled with the WEcR economic models on a regular basis, the Joint Research Institute of the European Commission that makes uses of our data and models, CGIAR institutes where we cooperate on development issue, and partners like Thuenen Institute, IIASA, University of Bonn that are regular partners in Horizon Europe projects.
Actions	15. A more explicit strategy with regard to long term cooperation will be developed, in line with the WUR wide strategy on national and international partnerships. On the one hand within SSG cooperation between disciplinary groups from both sides will be enhanced and with other more complementary biophysical groups from other knowledge units within WUR. On the other hand with external partners like PBL, CGIAR, IIASA, University of Bonn and other partners.

Recommendation 13. WEcR is advised to be transparent about all the processes in place that guard its impartiality and independence.

Response	WEcR follows WUR's <i>ethical code of conduct</i> and WUR developments on <i>open access</i> and <i>integrity</i> . Next to this, WEcR has put its core values – of which ethic dilemma's, data sharing, publication codes are part – into action through internal workshops and a restructured onboarding programme for new employees. In our acquisition and project cycles we have included senior scientist to be involved from the beginning in offers and proposals to guard good and reliable approaches & methods in projects. They stay involved during the execution of projects up to and including the final output, as a reviewer to maintain quality and independence. Key new methodological developments and research areas are published in scientific journals to get an independent peer review on the quality of our methods and therefore expert validation.
Actions	<p>16. To safeguard scientific independency and adhere to our scientific principles, WEcR will assess each project in all phases of research: when accepting and start of the project, during the research phase and especially in reporting. We will do this by intensifying the coordination between project managers and 'lead owners' (BD) on the one hand, and group heads and senior scientists on the other, in the entire project cycle.</p> <p>17. Internal workshops on the integrity and ethical code of conduct will be continued for new employees. As a starting point, we will do an intervision meeting with this group on this theme. This is repeated annually with project leaders.</p>

Recommendation 14. WEcR is advised to attract more young, middle aged and diverse researchers in continuance of the already made improvements.

Response	This is and has been an important point of attention in our Strategic personnel plan 2022-2025 (SPP), with positive developments in the past years. We will continue with the corresponding actions. Career development continues to be an important task for team leaders and higher management, and is embedded in our SPP.
Actions	18. We aim to attract a more diverse community of researchers. First of all, WEcR&WCDI will start a new (3 rd) Traineeship in September 2025, with the aim to attain a number of these young researchers for our organisation. Secondly, we will implement the recommendations of a recently conducted internal research on the international attractiveness of WEcR/WCDI as employer. The recommendations are shared with and followed up by WUR-HR corporate, (SSG-)HR Recruitment officers and our team leaders.

Recommendation 15. WEcR is recommended to organize its income model to become more resilient and independent in its funding sources.

Response	WEcR aims to have a balanced portfolio of customers resulting in a resilient funding model. However, as knowledge partner of LNV, WEcR has a pivotal position in policy support and due to significant developments in EU and The Hague, WEcR has been over demanded from this side, given limited capacity. We have more and more alternative funding sources, for example bilateral projects with business and other governments, but this should be expanded. The Team Leads meetings are important to select projects to achieve the desired market portfolio.
Actions	<p>19. The overall desired market division of WEcR funding is: 50% NL/LNV, 20% HEU, 25% bilateral incl PPP, 5% other (e.g. foundations). This means that we aim to have more projects in the bilateral market as well as foundations etc. We think the integration with WCDI allows for growth of that last market and to diverse more to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.</p> <p>20. The WEcR strategy also aims to increase overall margins from projects through value-based pricing, allowing WEcR to create funds to invest in co-funding options. This is essential to allow continuous innovation. However, creating this crucial margin is only possible if overhead costs are balanced with hourly rates that can be charged to co-financed projects.</p>

Recommendation 16. WEcR is advised to install account management and optimize the customer journey. Programme management and coordination are in need of closer monitoring. A professor as manager of the WUR SSG is recommended.

Response	<p>WEcR Knowledge and project results do not flow easily through WEcR and in outreach to markets. To ensure WEcR’s more balanced portfolio retains a sustainable business model and targeted societal impact, WEcR will develop strategic and mission-driven programmes. These programmes will connect our scientific insights to public and private sector market developments, and vice versa. This brings opportunities to also install account management and optimise the customer journey.</p> <p>WEcR agrees with the recommendation of a professor as a manager of the WUR SSG. Furthermore, the professor should have an economic background and reputation based on a good scientific track record and experience with contract research. However, WEcR recognises this decision is taken by the Wageningen board. <i>Note: in July 2024 the successor was presented by the board – a Professor from Utrecht University.</i></p>
Actions	<p>21. In our new strategy we will define a number of strategic, mission-driven programme lines. Each strategic programme line works on specific themes and goals, bilaterally and scientifically funded projects, and has a clear vision on related societal dialogues. The programme lines will combine expertise, insights and networks, enabling us to increase our impact on key stakeholders and society. Each of the strategic programme lines will have a clear proposition addressing the societal, scientific and market challenges in focus.</p> <p>22. We will define clear account management and optimize the customer journey; this will be the responsibility of the institute managers, together with business developers and ambassadors. To manager this effectively we will develop a dashboard to monitor the progress of the programme lines.</p>

4 Social Sciences Wageningen Research Institute

Considering the assessments of both institutes WCDI and WEcR and the discussions on the potential of the merger, the committee assesses the viability of a social sciences institute to be good.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations can be considered as broad guidance that could assist in addressing the challenges and exploiting the opportunities of integrating the two institutes into a common management structure:

Recommendation 17. Harmonise the strategy approach of both institutes to clearly spell out a common vision of SSRI aligned with the overall WUR vision.

Response	We are now six months further in the merger process of both our institutes. The merger process goes well, we have multiple working groups taking steps in developing the new organisation (e.g. WCDI staff is allocated to 3 teams of about 25 persons with team leaders installed), alignment of daily management and ways of working, culture activities to get to know each other, and we are also arriving at a unified strategy with one knowledge agenda and a set of clearly defined strategic themes and related programs.
Actions	23. We continue with our plan resulting in a harmonised vision and strategy for the new institute aligned with the WUR SP.

Recommendation 18. Clearly identify common themes to build upon future strategies in specific areas of Food Systems.

Response	We are in the process of defining these common themes. We have already defined strategic themes for WEcR, are redefining the themes for WCDI and bring them together in a new overview – also aligned to the WUR strategic themes that have been defined in the last months.
Actions	24. We will develop joint strategic programme lines to support the joint vision and mission of WSER

Recommendation 19. Develop a common culture by focusing on complementarities of strengths in “data and processes” with a focus on context relevance and sustainable local impacts.

Response	We have started a culture working group in January with colleagues from both units and especially focussed on the development of such a common culture.
Actions	25. By linking all researchers from all teams of WSER – and their work - to the strategic programme lines we will develop a common way of working and develop a working environment in which people find each other. We will implement the advices of the culture working group in the coming years. We will monitor the progress and identify people and teams that do not feel comfortable with the developments, and take appropriate actions.