

A TWO-WAY BENEFIT

The partnerships ACIAR has established with international agricultural research centres and networks are bolstering the livelihoods of people in developing countries while also broadening the knowledge of Australian scientists

BY JANET LAWRENCE

Partnerships have been ACIAR's methodology since its creation in 1982. The strength of its operations and the success of its outcomes are testimony to the effectiveness of this model. The idea of research institutions from Australia working as equals with counterpart institutions in developing countries was a pioneering concept at the outset. The traditional view of scientific and technical assistance was overseas experts bringing wisdom to needy regions—and often they came with little experience of prevailing systems in-country and a limited understanding of the wealth of local knowledge that resided with local scientists.

The ACIAR model was instituted to break down such perceptions and its acknowledged success has ensured it remains a focal point of operations today. But the partnership model has taken on new and different forms as the organisation has grown and evolved, and it has created a flow of benefits between all

partner countries and organisations involved.

Although ACIAR has no mandate to conduct research on its own, its program managers give substantial help and guidance in the development of projects, establishment of research partnerships and oversight of research progress. They hold an ongoing responsibility to ensure that worthwhile project outcomes have the greatest likelihood of being put to good use for the benefit of farmers in the developing world. These operation modes are valid for ACIAR's bilateral projects and also for the multilateral projects that establish connections with the international agricultural research centres (IARCs), most of which come under the umbrella of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR).

ACIAR is responsible for administering Australia's annual contribution to the IARCs, but it is no mere 'cheque book' relationship. Since the centre assumed this role in the early 1990s a proportion of annual allocation has been dedicated to project-specific funding, which

stipulates partnerships between nominated IARCs and Australian research institutions to work with developing-country counterparts for mutual benefit. Australian scientists have benefited from contributing to this global environment, and at the same time they have gained access to IARC genebanks and databases to help with their own research in Australia.

ACIAR crops research manager Dr Paul Fox says two international centres, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) and the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), have established highly productive partnerships with Australian cereal and legume research agencies. "In turn, these centres have helped connect Australians with scientists in the inaccessible areas of Iraq and Afghanistan, thus helping Australia to fulfil its development assistance objectives in these two highly sensitive countries," he says.

Another advantage from the CIMMYT/ICARDA linkages comes to Australia's farmers, who have gained from the development of new lines of wheat and legumes that are more productive and able to resist disease and drought.

The work of another centre, WorldFish, has also profited from partnerships involving Australian research institutions. ACIAR has funded many projects in Pacific countries where WorldFish has collaborated with such entities as CSIRO Fisheries (now CSIRO Marine and Atmospheric Research), the Australian Institute of Marine Science and Australian universities, and conducted research into high-interest species such as trochus and sea cucumber.

ACIAR's fisheries research program manager Barney Smith says these partnerships also aim to restore the livelihoods of coastal communities where populations of traditionally fished, commercially valuable species have diminished to the point of unsustainable harvesting.

Mr Smith says the ACIAR fisheries program connects with countries other than those where projects are underway. This happens

Dr Paul Fox: partnerships with the international crop research centres ICARDA and CIMMYT are a two-way benefit for Australia and the developing countries it, in-turn, supports with agricultural expertise.

PHOTO: EVAN COLLIS



through collaboration with the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia–Pacific (NACA), an intergovernmental organisation of 18 member countries that promotes rural development through sustainable aquaculture and aquatic resources management. “Connection through the network enables the promotion of outcomes of ACIAR-funded research to a broader regional audience,” he says.

NACA has been the anchor organisation for the formation of the Asia–Pacific Marine Finfish Aquaculture Network (APMFAN), which facilitates inter-country exchange about advances in hatchery and grow-out technology for marine finfish aquaculture in the Asia–Pacific region. APMFAN, through its workshops and direct project linkages, also promotes successful experience and shared information to help combat diseases of cultured aquatic animals in hatchery and grow-out facilities.



Operations analyst at the International Finance Corporation Rafiuddin Palinrungi (left) discusses SADI with ACIAR's Peter Home. SADI (the Smallholder Agribusiness Development Initiative) aims to improve rural sector productivity and growth by helping smallholder farmers gain more of a commercial footing. PHOTO: BRAD COLLIS

ACIAR is also an active partner in the Asia–Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI). As a regional coordinating organisation, APAARI's mission is to foster relationships between a wide range of Asia–Pacific research institutions, with the intent of

multiplying their effectiveness by exploiting synergy of resources and capabilities, thus avoiding duplication. This aligns strongly with the Australian Government's policy of promoting across-the-board multilateral approaches to global issues.

This same approach is evident in the AusAID-funded Australia–Indonesia Partnership for Reconstruction and Development and, from ACIAR's viewpoint, one component in particular—the Smallholder Agribusiness Development Initiative (SADI). SADI aims to improve rural-sector productivity and growth in four provinces in Eastern Indonesia—Nusa Tenggara Timur, Nusa Tenggara Barat, South East Sulawesi and South Sulawesi. It is a 10-year program with an initial funding commitment from the Australian Government of A\$38 million for the period July 2006 to December 2009.

ACIAR is implementing one of the three SADI subprograms, 'Support for Market-Driven Adaptive Research'. The work links strongly with the two other subprograms on enhanced smallholder production and marketing (supported by the World Bank) and strengthened private-sector agribusiness development (implemented by the International Finance Corporation). The ACIAR-led subprogram has taken a market and client-driven approach to strengthen province-based agricultural R&D capacity, and to help transfer knowledge to end-users with the aim of transforming subsistence farms into small profitable businesses. The SADI program has a broad product portfolio for study—coffee and cocoa, non-timber forest products, livestock (cattle, goats and pigs), tropical tree fruits (mango, rambutan), passionfruit, citrus, seawater aquaculture and lobster.

ACIAR has also tapped into the talents and resources of non-government organisations. Productive partnerships have emerged to promote the extension and adoption of research. The strong partnership spanning more than a decade between ACIAR and World Vision features at left. ■

ACIAR and World Vision

The soils of Thailand's Maha Sarakham province in the country's north-east suffer from low fertility, salinity and acidity. The rice-based farming systems the local farmers use are therefore unreliable. In March 2008 ACIAR and the World Vision Foundation of Thailand began working with these farmers to improve the reliability of their farming systems and lift income by increasing cattle production through better livestock-management practices.

The project was planned and implemented using the same approach applied in 2001, when ACIAR and World Vision implemented a program, also in Thailand, to foster greater application of the results of earlier ACIAR-funded research.

ACIAR's relationship with World Vision had its beginnings at a Crawford Fund seminar in 1999. There, participants sought to identify common ground between development NGOs and the scientific community in tackling problems of environmentally sustainable food production and food security for the advancement of developing-country rural communities.

ACIAR and World Vision talked further following this seminar and a short time later the two organisations signed a memorandum of understanding as a basis for project partnerships. This led to the implementation, in 2001, of three programs: fish feed production, temperate fruit industry development and vegetable production using fewer agrochemicals. These programs helped World Vision address technical challenges raised by communities from some of the poorest parts of Thailand.

The programs had some significant effects on communities. Changed horticultural practices reduced chemical use without affecting viability. The use of low-cost, homemade fish feeds improved the profitability of fish farming. And high-value, low-chill temperate fruit seedlings were distributed to farmers in the hill areas of northern Thailand.

The latest project in Maha Sarakham province is being led by World Vision. The first year of the project has focused on teaching farmers techniques of row-seeding and pre-rice mungbean cropping before transplantation of the wet-season rice crop seedlings. The project advisory team and experts from the rice research centres have also conducted training sessions.

In the area of cattle production, the farmers have learnt about the introduction of forage grasses, and trials of purple guinea, Nebiar, Mulato and Pangola grasses for forage have begun. The forages are being fed to cattle and processed for use as feed in the dry season.

Mr Collins says participating farmers have been satisfied with the program. “They feel they have learnt much and wish to expand their cultivation areas—to respond to the needs of their own cattle and also to sell for additional income,” he says.

He is also enthusiastic about a project workshop attended by World Vision program managers from adjacent areas. “They have gone home eager to take the techniques and practices they learnt about back to their own target communities. This highlights the value of what the project is doing.”