

INDICATIVE PRIORITIES FOR THE ACIAR AGRICULTURAL PROGRAM IN THE NORTH WEST HIGHLANDS OF VIETNAM

Priorities for collaborative agricultural research for development between Australia and Vietnam in the North West Highlands provinces of Vietnam were discussed on 20–21 September 2008 at a consultation workshop in Sa Pa, Lao Cai province.

The workshop included senior ACIAR staff and representatives of the:

- Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Department of Science and Technology, Department of International Cooperation, and National Centre of Extension);
- National R&D Institutes – Vietnam Academy of Agricultural Sciences (including institutes for Soils and Fertilisers, Plant Protection, Fruits and Vegetables, Legume Research and Development Centre, Centre for Agrarian Systems Research and Development, Northern Mountainous Agricultural and Forestry Science), Institute Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (Rural Development Centre) and National Institute for Animal Husbandry;
- Provincial Departments of Agriculture and Rural Development from Son La, Lai Chau, Lao Cai, Dien Bien and Yen Bai;
- Universities – Thai Nguyen University, Tay Bac University and Hanoi Agricultural University and University of Queensland;
- International Development Agencies – AusAID, World Bank, DANIDA and SNV
- International Agricultural Research Centres – CIAT and ILRI.

ACIAR will use the outcomes of the workshop as a framework to develop a program of collaborative research for development in the North West Highlands, potentially encompassing the provinces of Son La, Dien Bien, Lai Chau, Lao Cai and Yen Bai. The program will be subject to further advice and information from Vietnamese counterparts and alignment with the Australia-Vietnam (Whole-of-Government) Development Cooperation Strategy. These priorities were expressed by participants at the consultation workshop at a particular point in time and are therefore not to be considered as officially-sanctioned priorities of the Government of Vietnam. Proponents of collaborative research projects should initially approach the relevant ACIAR Research Program Manager.

The ACIAR-Vietnamese research partnership will involve a wide range of agencies such as national and provincial government departments, farmer groups, the private sector and non-government organizations. The program will benefit from previous projects, the importance of indigenous knowledge, analyse relevant lessons from related initiatives and develop effective working relationships with relevant donor and Vietnamese Government programs. There will be

a research focus through supply chains where smallholders are newly connected to markets that will enable significant livelihood impacts.

The overall program is oriented towards enabling improved rural livelihoods and reduced poverty for smallholder farmers in the North West Highlands region of Vietnam. These impacts will emerge through better market integration, ensuring improved profitability with more sustainable agricultural management practices within the upland farming systems, supported by collaborative research to enhance long term practice change.

Agreed priorities include:

1. Better integration of smallholders into profitable markets for high value crops

Many smallholders in the North West Highlands have not seen the same benefits to livelihood improvements from engagement in the global economy as the rest of Vietnam. Research is required to develop and evaluate models to improve engagement for the benefit of smallholders in the North West Highlands. Emerging markets created by improved infrastructure development have created an opportunity for improved market engagement by smallholders. For smallholders to benefit from these opportunities there are a range of constraints that need to be overcome.

Specific research priorities include:

- market and supply chain analysis to identify critical points to enhance stakeholder relationships and focus technical intervention to deliver improved competitiveness and smallholder profitability
- methods for smallholders to access local markets and improved market information
- development of high value niche products where there is strong market demand and identified competitive advantage
- market research and quality standards development for enhanced market access for fresh and processed products
- improving production and post-harvest processing technologies for temperate fruit and vegetable crops

2. Improved natural resource management to sustain crop productivity and profitability on sloping lands

To meet increasing market demand, particularly for animal feed, farmers from the North West Highlands are expanding cultivation, especially of maize, into sloping lands. This has been accompanied by poor management practices resulting in soil degradation and declining crop yields. Current land management practices to control the rate and level of erosion are inadequate resulting in the loss of nutrient rich topsoil, potential soil structural issues and

reduced agricultural productivity. There is a need to identify integrated management practices suitable for local agro-ecological conditions which will have socio-economic impacts for smallholders and address the constraints to sustainable crop production on sloping lands.

Specific research priorities include:

- improving crop nutrient management and land management techniques on sloping lands
- evaluation of alternative crop options, such as legumes, integrated in farming systems that currently support only a single crop annually
- integration of agro-forestry into farming systems including evaluation of multi-purpose trees
- benchmarking present soil fertility status and quantifying soil fertility changes under different cropping systems and integration of local knowledge to improve management practices

3. Improved management and marketing systems for large ruminants and pigs

With changing dietary preferences, livestock production is providing an opportunity for smallholders to integrate pigs and particularly large ruminants as a profitable component of their farming system that can improve livelihoods. A number of management constraints limit the capacity of farmers to take advantage of new market opportunities.

Specific research priorities include:

- identification of constraints in the livestock supply chains
- improved feed availability and integration of appropriate forage varieties into the farming system
- improved management of livestock reproduction and disease prevention and control

4. Enhanced capacity of local service providers (public and private sector) to enable the long term sustainability and profitability of smallholders

For long term impact in the North West Highlands there is a need to influence sustainable practice change that addresses socio-economic constraints in improving agricultural management and considers a whole-of- supply chain approach. To achieve this there is a need to foster institutional capacity to take promising research outcomes into broader scale application. Adopting participatory research approaches to facilitate technology adaptation may enable development of more-sustainable and profitable agricultural systems.

Specific research priorities include:

- Improving methods for delivery of advisory services to local farmers which are affordable and appropriate for ethnic minorities
- An improved understanding of appropriate local policy which includes village customary practice and local regulations
- Identification of policies that support more sustainable use of sloping lands

Program delivery

The delivery of the agreed priorities within the program will be through an ongoing commitment to research partnership projects. The initial partnership project will focus on improved market engagement of maize based and high value temperate farming systems, through improvements to long term practice change by smallholders that increase smallholder livelihoods. Importantly, there will be an emphasis on more sustainable resource management to improve productivity and sustainability on sloping lands with activities initially focused in Son La and Lai Chau provinces.