

Local priorities deliver results

ACIAR partnerships support Australian researchers to work with their overseas counterparts on issues of common concern. How our processes link Australian and developing-country scientists to smallholder farmers is the result of partnerships that adapt to changing circumstances.

KEY POINTS:

- **The best approaches to ending poverty are those that understand the issues present within a country or region and design tailored responses.**
- **Flow-on benefits from investment in agriculture include freeing-up labour, generating community growth, ensuring better health and education outcomes, and improving environmental management.**
- **Research priorities need to adapt to changing circumstances.**

BY ALEX BAGNARA

Disaster management, education, gender equality, infrastructure ... such diverse needs all compete for aid funding. So what makes investment in agricultural research and development a priority?

The answer is that half the world's people living in poverty are smallholder farmers.

Dungi Tudu is one of these smallholders. Her life has been one of closed opportunity: her husband Jamiswar was forced to migrate to find work; the land she was left to farm is leased; the income from her work is minimal and the food not enough to keep her children from hunger. Dungi's story of life in Amagara village in India's West Bengal mirrors that lived by families in Papua New Guinea, Tanzania, Lao PDR, Indonesia and elsewhere.

Many of these smallholders struggle to grow enough food for their families. For most, food security is a daily challenge because they do not have the money to buy food they cannot grow.

Often, smallholder land is also marginal—on the sides of hills, far from water, in low-rainfall areas and even on the edge of deserts.

Lack of income also prohibits these farmers from buying fertiliser or pesticides. If they do lose their crop to poor yields or insect attack, often they cannot afford to buy more seed, and what seed they do have in storage may have to be eaten.

This is the harsh reality of life for the world's rural poor. Opportunities taken for granted in developed countries—education, access

to health care, and sufficient daily calorie and protein intake—just do not exist.

Improved agricultural productivity is one way of changing this. Agricultural development research helps to transform smallholder production from subsistence to surplus; small perhaps, but enough to start paying for health care, supplementary nutrition and education.

The return on investment in agricultural aid therefore extends far beyond the immediate on-farm productivity improvements.

ESTABLISHING RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The Australian High Commissioner to India, Peter Varghese, commented on the importance of establishing partnerships during a formal consultation held earlier this year.

"The priorities articulated are both a guide and a touchstone to determine progress in the years ahead," he said. "Meeting these priorities will go a long way to changing lives mired in poverty."

One of those lives is Dungi. Her involvement in an ACIAR project saw her participate in a fertiliser trial, during which she learned about improved agronomic practices for her paddy fields.

The project was the result of previous consultations in India to set a mutual framework of research priorities addressed through projects. For Dungi, the project she became involved in was designed to answer research questions relating to water harvesting and the potential of cropping systems and agronomy to effectively use the harvested water.

ACIAR projects fit into a particular line of research aligned to regional and country priorities. These priorities are often evolving and ACIAR has a role in both responding to and informing the direction they take.

Since ACIAR began operations almost 30 years ago, it has supported Australian researchers and their counterparts in more than 40 developing countries, and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), which oversees global agricultural development research aimed at poverty alleviation.

Much has changed in that time. The CGIAR is undergoing a series of reforms. Some original partner countries are now taking up new roles in ACIAR projects. Where agricultural capacity has been lifted and secured, some traditional recipients of agricultural aid and intervention are now moving into a position to start helping other countries.

ACIAR is adapting to these changes by progressively lifting the assistance it provides in helping to develop not just farmer productivity, but farmer and community agribusinesses.

Research now extends beyond the smallholder farm to areas such as product quality, market access and supply-chain challenges.

A CONSTANTLY EVOLVING PROCESS

Given changing global research directions and the enhanced agricultural capability of some partner countries, ACIAR works to ensure aid continues to be directed to areas of greatest need.

ACIAR commissions independent reviews to determine the economic impacts arising from projects and capacity-building activities.

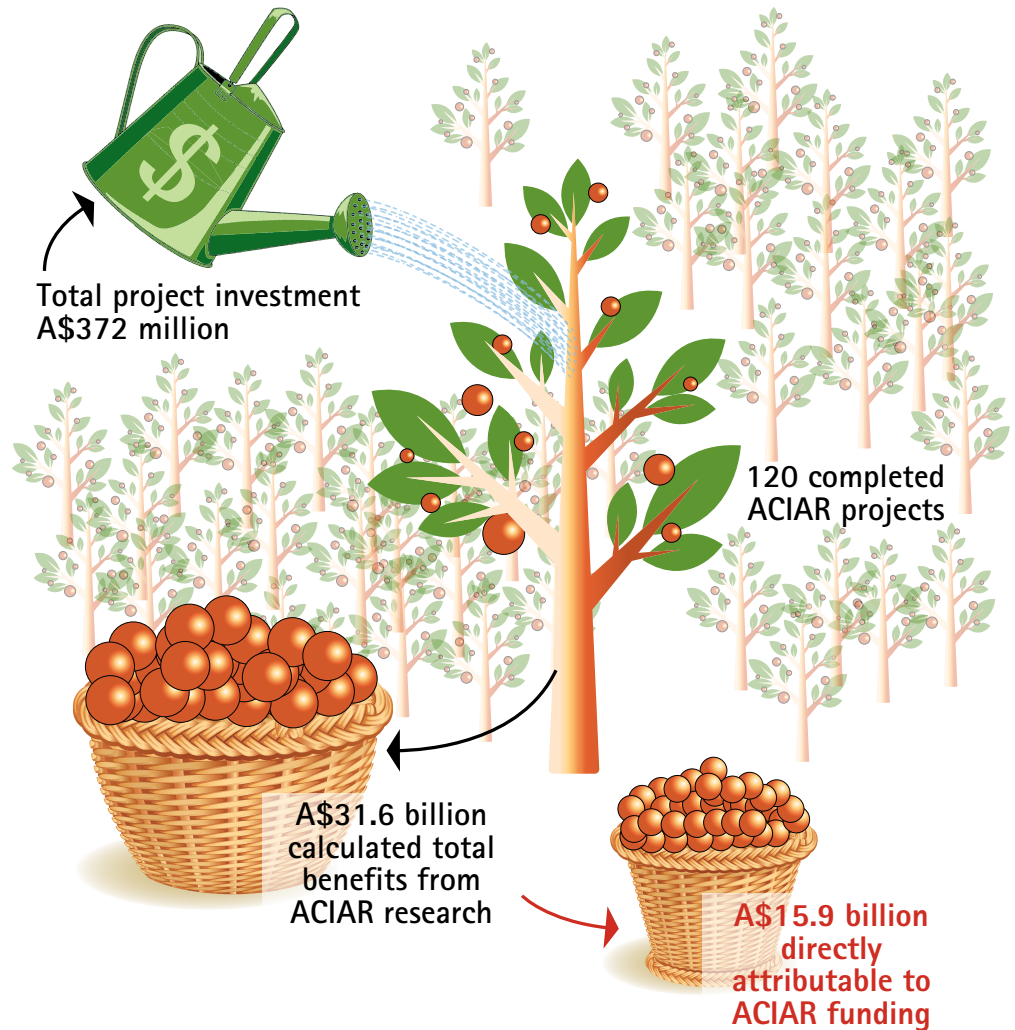
An analysis of 46 impact assessments on 120 completed ACIAR projects, with a total project investment of \$372 million, calculated total benefits from ACIAR research at \$31.6 billion. Of this, \$15.9 billion is directly attributable to ACIAR funding. This is more than three times the total ACIAR expenditure since its inception in 1982.

In 2011–12, the Australian Government

The World Bank's International Development Association suggests that of all the countries it finances, economic growth overall was fastest in those where agriculture projects were a component of their financing.

ACIAR's RETURN ON 120 PROJECTS*

Generates **\$31,6** billion



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intends to increase its official development assistance to \$4.8 billion—an increase of 8.4% in real terms. The Budget paper on international development assistance also maintains the timetable for increasing aid towards the target of 0.5% of gross national income (GNI) by 2015–16, as set out in last year's Budget.

That increase is a part of Australia's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals set out by the United Nations to halve global poverty. It is also about the moral dimension of transforming the lives of the poor.

Dungi is today working side-by-side with her husband Jamiswar. By applying what she has learned from her involvement in the ACIAR project Dungi is able to earn a profit. It is enough that Jamiswar no longer needs to migrate for work. He and Dungi profit from the land they lease. Their children benefit through money for an education and the family home is being repaired.

For Dungi it once seemed "unbelievable" that she could today be in this position. The story of how the lives of her family have been transformed is the story of ACIAR. The partnerships that make the unbelievable real for smallholders come about through ACIAR's experience, adaptability and, above all, the commitment of ACIAR's people to partnerships.

This edition of *Partners* tells ACIAR's story through the eyes of some of our partners, our people and the projects that join their lives to those of the smallholders who benefit. ■

THE CGIAR REFORM PROCESS

In 2008, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) set out to identify how best to adapt to and anticipate global changes and challenges, and ensure the continued supply of international 'public-good research' to help address them. This initiative culminated in the CGIAR's decision in December 2008 to adopt a new business model to fight poverty and hunger, while also conserving the environment.

VISION

To reduce poverty and hunger, improve human health and nutrition, and enhance ecosystem resilience through high-quality international agricultural research, partnership and leadership.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Food for people—create and accelerate sustainable increases in the productivity and production of healthy food by and for the poor.

Environment for people—conserve, enhance and sustainably use natural resources and biodiversity to improve the livelihoods of the poor in response to climate change and other factors.

Policies for people—promote policy and institutional change that will stimulate agricultural growth and equity to benefit the poor, especially rural women and other disadvantaged groups.