



Australian Government
Australian Centre for
International Agricultural Research

ISSUE 1 2022
aciar.gov.au

40 YEARS OF ACIAR
EDITION

partners

IN RESEARCH FOR DEVELOPMENT

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behind ACIAR

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A changing
organisation
opens unexpected
career door

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40
YEARS

About Partners

Partners in Research for Development is the quarterly publication of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). *Partners* presents articles that summarise results from ACIAR-brokered research projects and puts ACIAR research initiatives into perspective.

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This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through ACIAR. The views expressed in this publication are the author's alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government.

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ISSN 1839-616X (Online)
1031-1009 (Print)

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ACIAR

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Front cover:

Bottom left: Nitesh Nand in the laboratory at SPC, Fiji.

Top right: Agnes Mone Sumareke measures a tree in Papua New Guinea.

Back cover: Rice field in Thailand.



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From the CEO

Professor Andrew Campbell

This year marks 40 years of ACIAR. For this edition of *Partners* we have invited a range of ACIAR associates, friends and staff to share their reflections. Their writing shows how the organisation has evolved and made a difference over those 4 decades.

Among our contributors is Professor Gabrielle Persley AM. She was one of the first employees of ACIAR in 1982 and has remained closely connected ever since. Professor Persley shares an extensive and insightful exploration of how ACIAR began.

ACIAR General Manager, Country Partnerships, Dr Peter Horne shares his story and observations of ACIAR over his career both from within and outside the organisation. Our longest serving staff member Mirah Nuryati explores the evolution of our country network. Influential project leader Dr Harry Nesbitt, who worked on the ACIAR-funded Seeds of Life project in Timor-Leste, shares his thoughts on projects. And contemporary project leader Dr Brendan Brown (a former ACIAR graduate officer) considers the role ACIAR could play over the next 40 years.

Our celebration of 40 years of ACIAR kicked off with a dinner at the National Arboretum in Canberra in February, at which the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Marise Payne, gave a fantastic endorsement of the value and work of ACIAR, declaring 'I love ACIAR!'. The very joyful dinner was attended by many friends of ACIAR including current and former staff and Commissioners, members of the Policy Advisory Council, senior officers of the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and many researchers. We also enjoyed video testimonials from overseas partners and heart-warming messages from our country network colleagues who were unable to join us due to travel restrictions.

Across 2022 we will be producing a range of products to mark 40 years of ACIAR. This will include a podcast series capturing the oral histories of some of our senior partners. Plus videos, photos, social media content and dedicated web pages. We will also be



Professor Andrew Campbell.

publishing a book, available as hardcopy and online, that will showcase our work spanning projects, partners and people. We look forward to sharing our stories and achievements with you throughout the year.

Already published are two volumes of the 100th edition of the *ACIAR Impact Assessment Series*. These cover the impact of ACIAR-funded work in agricultural research-for-development from 1982 to 2022, applying both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. ACIAR has always evaluated our impact through evidence and reported on it. The *ACIAR Impact Assessment Series* is an incredible asset that has helped to direct our work and to maintain support for it. I encourage you all to read this latest edition.

This year also sees us undertaking a Mid-Term Review of the ACIAR 10-year Strategy 2018–27, overseen by the Commission for International Agricultural Research. There have obviously been some big changes in our external operating environment since we developed the 10-year strategy in 2017. The independent review panel chaired by Dr Wendy Craik has consulted with around 120 ACIAR staff and stakeholders. The panel's report will be considered by the Commission at our next meeting in June, hopefully in Vietnam. We will discuss any changes required for the next 5 years of the Strategy, in full light of the 40-year history and legacy of ACIAR. We want to build upon this platform and position ACIAR to have even greater impact into the future. 🌱

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'A Campbell'.

Professor Andrew Campbell
Chief Executive Officer, ACIAR



The people behind ACIAR

Professor Gabrielle Persley

Flying into Glasgow, a place I also call home, there is a large sign over the arrivals hall that proclaims, “People make Glasgow”. I am reminded of this simple statement, chosen by the people of Glasgow to reflect their city. It is also people who make ACIAR. Myriad people have contributed to ACIAR since 1982, to create an institution that has improved the lives of millions of people in the developing world, and of which all Australians can be proud. So, who are the people of ACIAR?

1978–82: inception to commencement

ACIAR was the result of a political opportunity meeting a scientific plan. The Australian Government’s overseas aid programs had supported agricultural and rural development projects, mainly in Asia, since the 1960s. These were primarily technical assistance projects, delivered overseas by agricultural consulting companies, that provided individual technical experts from Australia.

There was limited institutional engagement from Australian agricultural scientists, who were developing new technologies such as improved crop varieties, pest and disease control, and animal vaccines to increase the productivity of Australian agriculture. This limitation was recognised by the then Australian Development Assistance Bureau (ADAB). In 1977–78, the ADAB Director, Mr Jim Ingram, established a Science and Technology (S&T) unit within ADAB and a Consultative Committee on Research and Development (CCRD), chaired by Sir John Crawford, Chancellor of ANU.

This CCRD group included representatives of Australia’s national science agency CSIRO, state government departments of agriculture, and universities. Its task was to find ways to increase the engagement of the Australian scientific community in the Australian overseas aid program, including in agricultural research and development (R&D). The agricultural sub-group of CCRD, chaired by Dr Ted Henzell of CSIRO, was particularly concerned with how Australia’s expertise in agricultural R&D could contribute more towards improving agriculture in neighbouring countries, in a more systematic and long-term way than on a project-by-project basis. ADAB also commissioned a study, led by Professor Helen Hughes of ANU, on the feasibility of Australia



Professor Gabrielle Persley AM. Photo: International Livestock Research Institute.

establishing a broader S&T agency, similar to the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) addressing agriculture, health and education. Thus, when the timing was right, a plan for an agricultural research initiative within the overseas aid program had been conceived.

The political opportunity arose because the then Australian Prime Minister, Mr Malcom Fraser, was hosting the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting (CHOGM), in Melbourne (30 September – 7 October 1981). In recognition of hosting the Heads of Government of all Commonwealth countries, Prime Minister Fraser decided he would announce a new



Right: Members of the ACIAR Policy Advisory Council at its first meeting in Goroka, Papua New Guinea.



Above: (L-R) Deputy Director-General of the International Rice Research Institute Dr Dennis Greenland talks to Professor Gabrielle Persley and Dr Eric Craswell of ACIAR.



Professor Gabrielle Persley (R) being interviewed by Australian journalist Kate Sieper (L) at a conference in Nairobi in 2007. Photo: International Livestock Research Institute.

Australian aid initiative. Firstly, in January 1981, the Prime Minister sought advice from the then Foreign Minister, Mr Tony Street. Sir John Crawford and the ADAB leadership (Director, Mr Jim Ingram and Deputy Director, Mr Richard Manning), put forward the idea of an agricultural research initiative, based on CCRD's previous identification of agricultural R&D as an area where the Australian aid program could do better. The concept was to develop an Australian international agricultural research centre that would support research partnerships between scientists in Australia and developing countries to develop solutions to problems of mutual interest that would benefit both Australian and developing country agriculture.

The concept of Australia supporting research partnerships with neighbouring countries to solve problems for mutual benefit to Australia and the partner countries was the critical distinguishing feature of the initiative.

Prime Minister Fraser liked this idea as playing to Australia's strengths in agriculture and supported its further development in 1981. ADAB was tasked to develop the initiative, under the direction of the Minister for Foreign Affairs. A taskforce was established, led by Dr John Baker, Head of Policy, primarily to develop a Cabinet Submission for the Government's formal approval and financial commitment. At the time I was the agricultural scientist within ADAB's S&T unit and I was seconded to this taskforce to assist in preparing the cabinet submission and the ACIAR legislation.

The Australian Government's intention to support a new international agricultural research initiative in honour of CHOGM was included in a speech Prime Minister Fraser gave at the Commonwealth Club in Adelaide on 9 February 1981, the first time the Prime Minister mentioned the developing initiative in public. Cabinet approved the initiative in mid-1981 and it was formally announced during CHOGM in October 1981.



Above: Participating in the ACIAR-Crawford Fund-Syngenta Fund launch of the book 'The Business of Plant Breeding' in 2017: (L-R) Colin Chartres, Crawford Fund; Nasser Yao, Demand led breeding Pan African Coordinator, Nairobi; Gabrielle Persley, University of Queensland; Mellissa Wood, ACIAR; J C Rubyogo CIAT Nairobi; Vivienne Anthony Syngenta Foundation; Shimelis Hussein, African Centre for Crop Improvement South Africa; (back row partly obscured) Agyemang Danquah West Africa Crop Improvement Centre - University of Ghana. Photo: Crawford Fund.

The *Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research Act 1982* (ACIAR Act) that established ACIAR as a statutory authority was passed by the Parliament, with bipartisan support in the House of Representatives in October 1981, and in the Senate in May 1982. The ACIAR Act was proclaimed by the Governor General on 3 June 1982. Sir John Crawford was appointed as the first Chair of the Board, Dr Denis Blight as interim Director, and me as Science Advisor. Thus, ACIAR was born (with multiple fathers, and a few mothers as well).

1982–2022: policy meets science

An important part of the rationale for establishing ACIAR as a statutory authority within the portfolio of Foreign Affairs was that this would give it a degree of autonomy within the public service and that it would be led by agricultural science professionals.

The ACIAR Act established ACIAR with a Board of Management and a Policy Advisory Council, with the Director reporting to the Board of Management. Later, the ACIAR Act was updated and the Board of Management was replaced by the Commission for International Agricultural Research, with the CEO reporting directly to the Minister for Foreign Affairs. The Board, and now the Commission, comprises eminent Australians, mainly from the rural sector or the research community, who provide oversight and policy advice to the Minister. In this advisory role to the Minister, the Commission is complemented by the Policy Advisory Council, which consists of members from partner countries and/or international research organisations familiar with ACIAR internationally.

ACIAR has had 6 Directors over its 40-year history, each serving a term of up to 7 years, as set up by the ACIAR Act. Professor Jim McWilliam was appointed as the first substantive Director in 1982, followed by Drs George Rothschild, Bob Clements, Peter Core and Nick Austin, and Professor Andrew Campbell. The Directors have come from a range of backgrounds in agricultural science or economics, with extensive knowledge of Australian agriculture and the challenges of sustainable food and agricultural production in challenging environments. All have come with a strong commitment to improving the livelihoods of rural communities in the developing world. Each has brought a different style to the organisation. All have used their skills to guide ACIAR through the challenges of their time, including several changes of Australian governments of different political persuasions, other changes in Ministers, budget pressures, as well as the changing international environment, and sometimes unforeseen changes within partner countries, due to natural disasters, civil unrest, or financial crises. The fact that ACIAR is celebrating its 40th year of operations in 2022 is testimony to their success.

When ACIAR was established, it was envisaged that the scientific staff would be experienced research scientists coming from Australian research organisations and/or international agricultural research centres. It was also considered desirable that the senior research staff leading the research programs would join ACIAR for up to 7 years as a part of their career, or on a fixed-term secondment from their home organisation. This would give the new organisation both continuity and flexibility in its staffing arrangements and the ability to bring in new skills over time as ACIAR program areas and partnerships evolved. This model has served ACIAR well.

The research program leaders and the leaders of ACIAR global programs, over the past 4 decades are too numerous to mention by name here, but all have



contributed mightily to the success of ACIAR, as without successful research programs, there would be no ACIAR to talk about and demonstrate its success.

An important early decision was to establish an Impact Assessment Unit under the initial leadership of Dr Jim Ryan, ACIAR Deputy Director, which would establish monitoring and evaluation systems and commission independent impact assessments to measure the impact of ACIAR projects and programs over time. In 2022, ACIAR has published a synthesis of 100 impact assessments which demonstrate the value for money of the Australian Government's investments in international agricultural research and the benefits that have been delivered both to farming communities in the developing world and to Australian farmers over the past 4 decades.

ACIAR has developed strong relationships with partner countries across the Indo Pacific, eastern Africa, and South and West Asia. ACIAR has a network of in-country officers in these geographies, led by dedicated people from the host countries who interact with the host country governments to identify

Myriad people have contributed to ACIAR since 1982, to create an institution that has improved the lives of millions of people in the developing world, and of which all Australians can be proud.

their priorities and where the governments would welcome partnerships with ACIAR in areas of mutual interest.

ACIAR people critically include the science partners – the many scientists in Australia and in partner countries – who develop a shared idea into a joint project, work it through the various approval processes and implement it to develop

solutions to shared problems and deliver these solutions to farmers. Strong science partnerships and enduring friendships have been built through scientists working together on these ACIAR projects, which last long after the projects themselves are completed.


A sometimes-overlooked group of ACIAR people are those responsible for the program management and the finance and administration of the organisation. These are the people who make the programs and projects function in Australia and overseas. Each Research Program Manager is supported by an experienced project officer who is responsible for the efficient operation of a suite of projects,

including dealing with the reporting and accountability requirements with the commissioned organisations within Australia and with overseas partners.

At the corporate level, there are also many reporting and accountability requirements for ACIAR for a statutory authority within the Australian Government. There is also an increasing emphasis on cross-cutting issues to be addressed in all projects, including gender and diversity, education and training and communications to stakeholders about ACIAR work and the benefits it delivers.

2022 and beyond: the future

Continuity and continuously recreating ACIAR is the secret of its success.

Reflecting on the hundreds of people who have contributed to ACIAR over its lifespan, 2 themes emerge, which may even seem counterfactual. The first is the value of continuity and corporate memory in a science-based organisation that is firmly located within the Australian overseas aid program. The second is the ability of the ACIAR leadership, from the responsible Australian Ministers for Foreign Affairs, through to the Directors, the governance bodies and the science leaders, in Australia and overseas, to continuously recreate ACIAR by learning lessons and being an agile organisation able to see around corners and continuously reinvent itself in always-challenging environments. This agility bodes well for ACIAR people celebrating their golden anniversary in 2032. 

About the author

Professor Gabrielle Persley AM is an Honorary Professor with the School of Agriculture and Food Sciences, University of Queensland. She was one of the first ACIAR staff members, being appointed in 1982 as Science Advisor and ACIAR Research Program Manager for Crops (1982–1991). She also served on Australia's Commission for International Agricultural Research (2017–2020).



Leaders voice support for ACIAR

Two Australian leaders have thanked the people who have helped ACIAR to achieve its goals across its 40-year history. And to recognise the impact the organisation has had towards agricultural research and development.



Marise Payne.

Senator the Hon Marise Payne

Australia's Minister for Foreign Affairs Senator the Hon Marise Payne.

Let me start by saying I love ACIAR.

Since it was first established in 1982... this organisation has been making a significant contribution to the immense challenges of agriculture and food production in the Indo-Pacific [region].

Communities right across the [region] have benefited from Australia's agricultural expertise, and our willingness to share it, confident in the knowledge that we're helping to build a more stable and prosperous region.

ACIAR is pivotal to life changing moments around this region. And frankly, around the globe. The partnerships that ACIAR has forged with organisations around the world, amongst our partners and friends help with that every day of the week.

I'm very much looking forward to seeing the next decades... and how much [ACIAR] helps to continue to bring together our Indo-Pacific region as we start to recover from the huge impact of COVID-19 on our communities and our economies. And so with that, let me add my congratulations to ACIAR on an extraordinarily impressive list of qualities. And thank you all very much.



Fiona Simson.

Fiona Simson

Chair of Australia's International Commission for Agricultural Research and President of the National Farmers' Federation (Australia).


Long before I was appointed Chair, I have been impressed by the work of ACIAR. For an organisation of its size, its impact – the positive outcomes it generates are incredible.

Thank you to each and every one of you involved in delivering these outcomes. As an Australian taxpayer, a farmer and an industry leader, I am extremely proud of ACIAR as a unique part of our agricultural innovation system that is delivering major benefits for our partner countries, and for Australia.

The dedicated staff of this small agency, the many research and industry leaders who have been involved on the Board and the Commission, and the many hundreds of scientists from Australia and partner countries who have delivered projects on the ground, have done an amazing job.

On behalf of all Australians, and especially our rural industries and rural communities, I would like to say thank you.

ACIAR at 40 is in its prime. We live in challenging times, but we have a mighty little organisation doing amazing work that is every bit as relevant today as it was in 1982.

Excerpts from speeches given at an ACIAR event held on 8 February 2022 in Canberra, Australia. 



Fostering fertile ground for the future

Dr Peter Horne

In the 1980s I was researching tropical forages for my PhD. My field site was inside the fence of a research station in Indonesia, but I enjoyed spending time outside the fence in villages across the country. It was here I learnt other important lessons about culture and relationships – and saw the potential impact of agricultural research on smallholder farmers and rural communities.

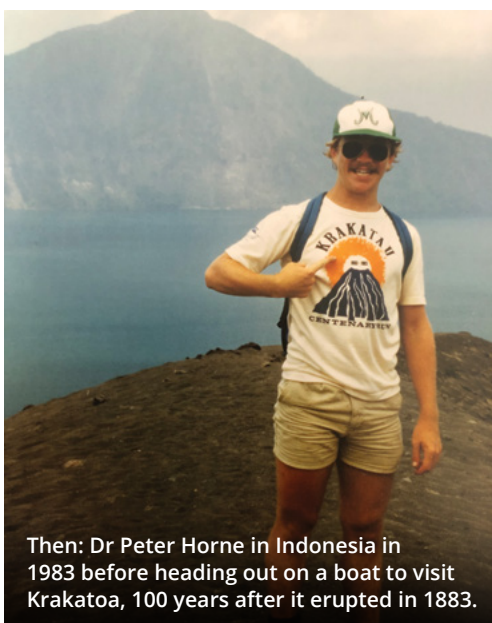
It was also in Indonesia, where I first encountered ACIAR – when the Board and Policy Advisory Council visited my field site in 1984. As a young researcher it was a bit daunting to have science celebrities scrutinise my work, but it started a lifelong connection including through my first job, which was on an ACIAR project.

This project sought to identify forages that could stabilise acid soils in south central China to underpin a smallholder livestock industry. Long cold weeks in a stone building in remote Hunan in winter will be forever etched in my brain along with the wonderful friendships of my fellow Chinese and Australian researchers. The inevitable consequence of these experiences was a lifelong addiction to trying to make a difference to the lives of smallholder farmers through research.

Different times, same role for science

During the 1980s and '90s, most ACIAR partner countries had newly emerging research capability and very limited funding. On the project in China, ACIAR needed to provide every dollar for running the research. It is truly amazing to consider how our relationships with partner countries have changed since then. Many have much stronger research capabilities, and they look to Australia not for drivers of research but true collaboration, often with substantial co-investment.

Through these changing relationships, the role ACIAR played in enabling international research collaboration remained strong. I spent much of my 22 years in South-East Asia working with researchers from across the region developing and applying



Then: Dr Peter Horne in Indonesia in 1983 before heading out on a boat to visit Krakatoa, 100 years after it erupted in 1883.



Now: Dr Peter Horne in his current role as ACIAR General Manager, Country Partnerships (2019).



participatory research approaches in smallholder livestock systems. Those approaches remain as important and valid now as they were then. It isn't just "the right thing" to involve farmers in research; it's usually essential. They are the experts in their livelihood systems and no matter how much we study those systems we can never match that expertise. We learned that while smallholder farmers are typically outstanding observers, they do not always tell interpreters their observations. Tapping into this farmer knowledge through genuine partnerships between researchers and farmers is therefore critical to ensure a shared knowledge base upon which to undertake research and development activities together.

We also learned how important it was to be up-front with farmers that we didn't have cash incentives for participation, nor did we have ready-made answers. But we did have ideas, interesting technologies and knowledge as well as the commitment to work with them over the long haul to seek answers to problems and develop new farming options with them.

This approach usually led to insightful relationships that, for much of the time, threw up surprising outcomes in the field. We were successful in some situations but not in others. This taught us how often the outcomes of participatory research are unanticipated. Even where we were not successful, there were important lessons so long as the engagement with farmers was committed and genuinely participatory. One of those lessons was that assumptions which I thought held true, often did not. Assuming that the ways farmers optimise their livelihood strategies is similar to ours, for example. It usually is not. In short, through many cycles of testing and reflection, we learned to evaluate our most strongly held assumptions about smallholder livelihood systems... and then test them again.

Changing country network

In response to the rapidly changing nature of the relationships between ACIAR and its partner countries since the 1980s and '90s, the network of ACIAR staff employed in our partner countries (the "Country Network") has also transformed. From initially being administrators of our international programs they are now stakeholder relationship managers and the source of strategic in-country advice and analysis.

We also now have constant cross-mentoring and support in place. Ten years ago, it was ACIAR staff in the Canberra office mentoring the network, now Kenya is supporting the Pacific region or Vietnam is

supporting India. The Country Network maintains our country partnerships beyond the boundaries of individual projects and steers those partnerships to create new opportunities for collaboration.

Building research capacity

Through decades of providing formal and mentored capacity-building support to in-country researchers, there are now many hundreds of alumni across the region driving change in smallholder systems through their own governments and institutions. The ACIAR model of supporting international research collaboration is, however, increasingly challenged as Australian research institutions find it difficult to maintain the research capability we mobilise.

When I was young and first started my research career, there were 40 scientists in Australia doing the type of work I was involved in. There's now one. This is not an uncommon story across different research sectors in Australia. ACIAR recognises we need to be more proactively engaged in supporting early- and mid-career researchers in Australia by creating opportunities for them to engage in international projects.

Perhaps the greatest strength of ACIAR support to international research collaboration is the relationships formed between people. Throughout our region, research collaboration is built on relationships, not protocols. It is a great pleasure now to often (and accidentally) meet someone who was a young researcher on an ACIAR project 30 years ago and who is now a senior manager in their own system, making a difference. These people almost always have strong and fond memories of their early research experiences and mentoring. Australia must not lose this reputation.

I was mentored by wonderful people throughout my career. To now find myself at the other end of that career coordinating the Policy Advisory Council that had daunted me so much as a young student is just one of those wonderful ironies that life throws up. 🌱

About the author

Dr Peter Horne is the ACIAR General Manager, Country Partnerships, (2012-current) and was previously an ACIAR Research Program Manager.



A changing organisation opens unexpected career door

Mirah Nuryati

In 1991 I was working as a secretary within the Australian Embassy, Indonesia, mostly supporting Australian diplomat Mrs Sue Copland, whose husband Dr John Copland was an agricultural scientist and Research Program Manager (Animal Sciences) for ACIAR. John asked me to help with typing his handwritten research notes into the computer and at the end of his study leave in Indonesia, he asked if I'd be interested in working formally for ACIAR, supporting the Country Manager. I said yes, and I am now the longest-serving staff member (31 years) in ACIAR. In 2007, I was awarded an Australian Public Service Medal for my contribution to strengthening ACIAR collaboration with relevant Indonesian ministries.

Evolving roles

When I started, I had no scientific background, just secretarial and administrative skills, but the ACIAR program was not as big then as it is now. In the 1990s, the program was moderate, mostly ACIAR projects in animal science and fisheries, and our role was to offer administrative support, coordinate meetings and act as a travel agent for Australian researchers visiting or working in Indonesia. I first visited Australia in 1996 to familiarise myself with ACIAR, and a lot of things made sense after that.

I have worked in four positions, starting as an Administration Officer. Then in 2002–10 I was Assistant to the Country Manager, and in 2010–15 my position changed to Stakeholder Relationship Manager, reflecting the increasing complexity of the ACIAR program in Indonesia. At the time Country Managers were usually Australian expats who changed every 2 to 3 years.

With increasing recognition of the value of national staff – including their local relationships, cultural knowledge, and interest and capacity to stay with ACIAR for the longer term – the organisation changed its approach and, in 2015, I became the Country Manager.

Inspiring leaders

Two people were very influential in my career. Ms Rhonda McLellan was the ACIAR Country Manager for 3 years in the 2000s during her husband's diplomatic assignment. She transformed the ACIAR Indonesia office from being jointly managed by AusAID, to working independently under ACIAR.



In recognition of her outstanding service, achievements and leadership Ms Mirah Nuryati was awarded the Public Service Medal in 2007. L-R: Then Australian Ambassador to Indonesia Mr Bill Farmer AO, Ms Mirah Nuryati, then ACIAR Chief Executive Officer Mr Peter Core, then ACIAR Country Manager to Indonesia Mr Julien de Meyer.



And Dr Peter Horne, the current General Manager for Country Partnerships, has always encouraged the Country Network to develop our capacity to align with the recommendations of the 2013 review of ACIAR. Peter has been stimulating us to be partnership brokers and our next step is to be knowledge brokers. This work is ongoing.

When the independent review of ACIAR was commissioned in 2013, it was led by Australia's former Ambassador to Indonesia, Mr H.E. Bill Farmer, AO. When Mr Farmer and the review team visited, the ACIAR team in Indonesia accompanied them to project sites in East Java and Lombok, and we had lots of opportunities to provide insights from the Country Office's viewpoint.

Two of the Review's recommendations changed the organisation and my career. The recommendation to establish a Senior Executive Service Officer to enable more extensive senior-level liaison with organisations and agencies within Australia and better support for the efficient discharge of the research program – this is now Peter Horne's job; and the other was the recommendation to examine the role of Country Managers, with a view to enhancing the use of their in-country knowledge and experience.

ACIAR also decided to appoint local people as Country and Regional Managers, so that regional and country offices are led by local staff in all countries. This means I am an Indonesian national but working within the Australian mission and representing Australia's interests in dealing with our Indonesian partners.

Bridge-building

ACIAR has been partnering in Indonesia for almost four decades. Geographically, Indonesia is very close to Australia, but the two countries have huge differences in terms of culture, socio economics and politics. We position ourselves as a bridge between the two countries and we have nurtured people-to-people relationships over the years at various levels.

We respect our partners equally and do not apply a donor-recipient relationship. It is our belief that every partner contributes their different capabilities and resources to collaborative research to seek solutions to common agricultural issues. Therefore, ACIAR is highly regarded as a trusted and long-term partner for agricultural research in Indonesia.

The Indonesian Government is currently restructuring its research and development (R&D) systems with the establishment of BRIN (Badan Riset dan Inovasi Nasional – National Research and Innovation Agency)


and the amalgamation of all R&D agencies of the technical ministries. We think ACIAR is well-positioned to assist the Indonesian Government in bridging a gap between research and implementation for smallholder farmers and offering science-based evidence for the policy-making process.

The strength of our knowledge of people, culture and government has been crucial, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, because how can you develop

We respect our partners equally and do not apply a donor-recipient relationship. It is our belief that every partner contributes their different capabilities and resources to collaborative research to seek solutions to common agricultural issues.

a new research project without understanding the people or meeting them? The pandemic has taught us many invaluable lessons with travel restrictions, the increasing risks and the real need to cooperate and build trust with existing and new partners. I do hope this will open up more opportunities to qualified Indonesian research institutions or universities to play a greater role as a Commissioned Organisation. This can also be applied through

a trilateral South-South research collaboration with other countries, such as Cambodia, Pacific island countries and others.

Indonesia is becoming one of the middle-class-income countries of Asia. It is our aim for the future that the country will become a stronger and more strategic partner, in which any research collaboration can be co-designed and co-funded. 

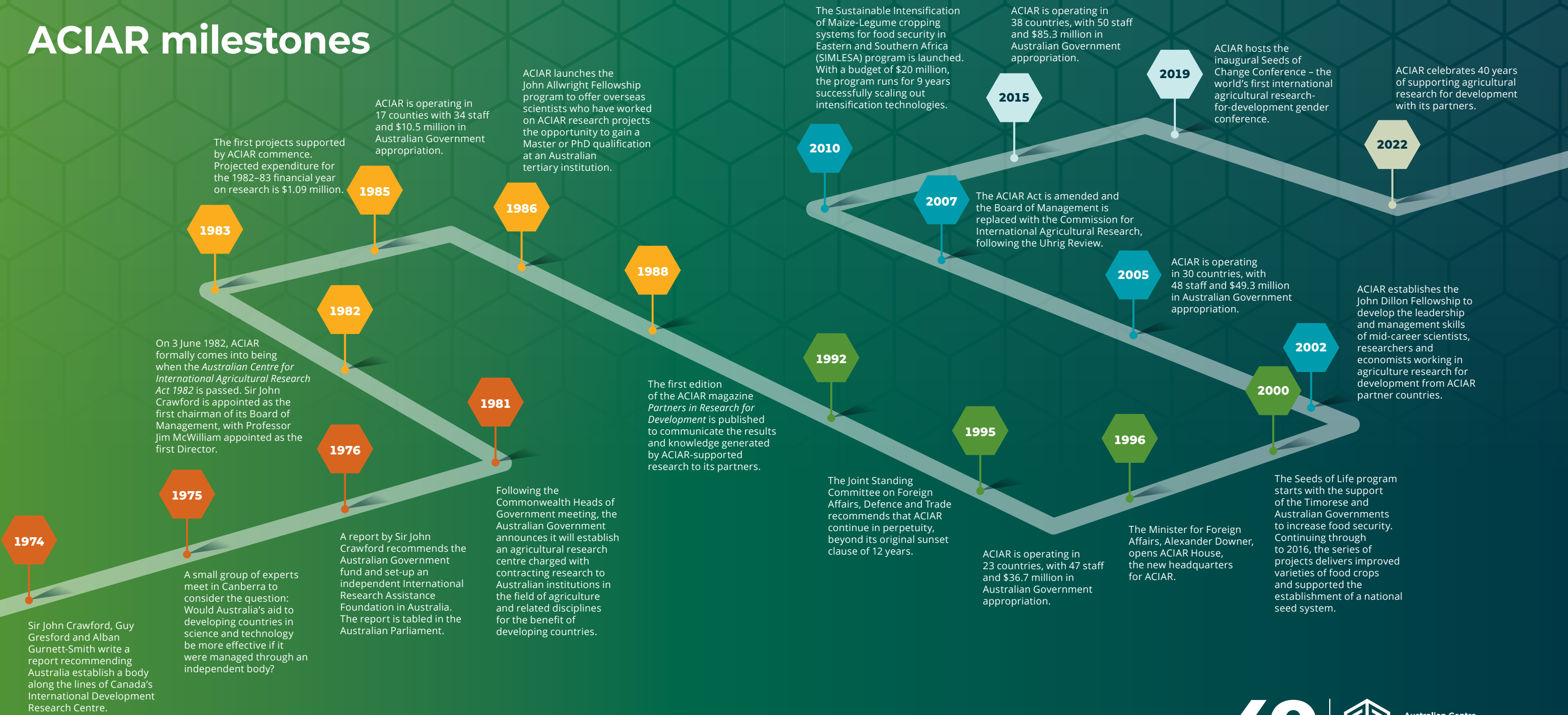
About the author

Ms Mirah Nuryati is currently the ACIAR Country Manager for Indonesia. She started working with ACIAR in 1991 and is currently the longest-serving ACIAR staff member.





ACIAR milestones



Pre-ACIAR 1982-1991 1992-2001 2002-2011 2012-2021 2022

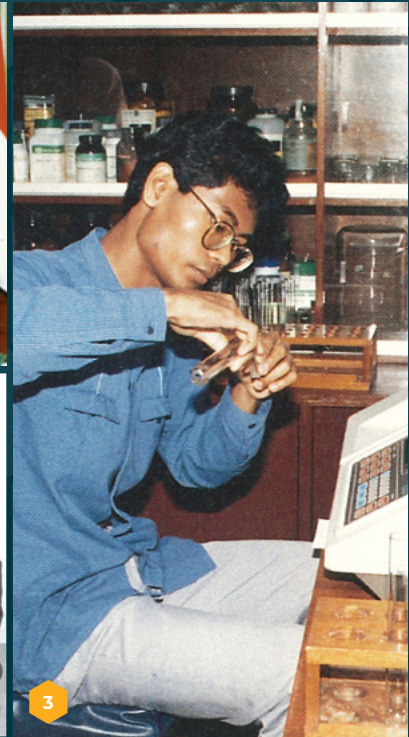
40 YEARS



Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
EST. 1982



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- 1. ACIAR founder Sir John Crawford (centre front in brown shirt) attending a Policy Advisory Council meeting in Indonesia.
- 2. The first ACIAR staff photo, featuring Professor Jim McWilliam (centre), foundation director of ACIAR, with ACIAR program and administrative staff.
- 3. ACIAR supported post-graduate training for Mr Mat Azhar bin Mat Lazim in Australia. He returned to Malaysia to work on biological nitrogen fixation measurement.
- 4. ACIAR supported CSIRO and Thailand to improve testing methods for foot-and-mouth disease. Dr Laurie Gleeson (L) & Dr Itipol Chaichanapunpol (R) discuss results.

- 5. Thai scientists use vacuum extraction to analyse sap from legumes using the 'xylem-solute technique' developed through ACIAR-supported research led by CSIRO.
- 6. Australian scientist Dr Phillip Banks researched genes resistant to barley yellow dwarf disease in wheat, contributing knowledge to reduce the impact of pests and diseases.
- 7. Coordinator for an ACIAR-funded stored grains project, Mr Chuwit Sukprakarn of Thailand (L), talks with Ms Rosalind Goodwin (R) at the CSIRO Stored Grains Research Laboratory.



1. Across Africa, chickens were able to be vaccinated against Newcastle disease, through ACIAR-funded research that led to the development and roll-out of the vaccine.
2. Dr Howarth Bouis (L), Director of the CGIAR Micronutrients Project, with Dr Glenn Gregorio and Dr Robin Graham (R) look at a high-iron, high-zinc line of rice.
3. ACIAR Research Manager Mr Colin Piggin (centre, in cap) discusses horticultural research with Australian and Thai project team members.
4. ACIAR project leader Dr Stephen Blaber (R) from CSIRO working with Solomon Island project staff to research the impact of baitfish fishing on reef fish stocks.

5. With ACIAR support, Australian scientist Dr Ken Street, the "Seed Hunter", collected rare seed in central and South Asia to safeguard the biodiversity of food crops.
6. ACIAR-supported researchers in the field in India.
7. Dr George Smith (L) discusses ACIAR-supported conservation agriculture research, which he was reviewing at the time, with Chinese officials and farmers.
8. ACIAR project leader Dr Denis Anderson inspects a beehive in the Papua New Guinea highlands.
9. Dr HilleRisLambers (R) and his assistant from the International Rice Research Institute, screen deep-water rice.

1990s



1. ACIAR project staff discuss on-farm management of the devastating Panama disease with a banana grower in Indonesia.

2. Australian farmer Mr John Ferrier, Birchip Cropping Group (centre in blue shirt), meets Nepalese farmer Mr Mata Parsad Barma, community members and researchers.

3. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd met ACIAR staff in Indonesia during a visit. (L to R): Ms Mirah Nuryati, Ms Wina Ludwina, Prime Minister Rudd and Mr Julien de Meyer.

4. Dr Harry Nesbitt (L) directed the ACIAR 'Seeds of Life' projects that transformed food security in Timor-Leste, giving over 65,000 farming families access to certified seed.

5. ABC journalist Ms Melanie Sim (R) visited Vietnam to report on the impact of ACIAR with the support of the Crawford Fund – a promoter and advocate for ACIAR-funded work.

6. Staff celebrate the 25th anniversary of ACIAR in the Canberra office in May 2007.

7. Dr Meryl Williams (third from L) and Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance Mr Bob McMullan (fourth from L) with ACIAR Commissioners.

8. Foreign Minister Alexander Downer (second from R) during a visit to ACIAR.



1. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Ms Marise Payne and ACIAR CEO Mr Andrew Campbell accept the Friendship Order awarded by the Vietnam Government to ACIAR.
2. ACIAR Forestry Research Program Manager Dr Tony Bartlett met the Queen after an ACIAR-funded project was accredited under the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy initiative.
3. The 'Happy Seeder' is a product of ACIAR-funded research and has been adopted across South Asia.
4. Mr Nitesh Nand, SPC works inside the ACIAR-funded Plant Health Laboratory Facility in Fiji, opened in 2020.
5. L to R: ACIAR Alumni Dr Dexter Dela Cruz and Professor Peter Harrison examine coral larvae specimens.

6. L to R: Ethiopian farmer Mr Emmanuel Tuyireze meets Dr Peter Horne (ACIAR), Dr Leah Ndungu (ACIAR) and Professor Catherine Muthuri (ICRAF).
7. As part of an ACIAR-supported project in the Philippines, local partners helped get more vegetables to community members affected by COVID-19.
8. Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Ms Julie Bishop (R), visits a display of vegetables with Vietnam Women's Union President Ms Hoa, at the launch of an ACIAR project.
9. ACIAR hosted the Seeds of Change conference, at the University of Canberra, on gendered social relations and women's empowerment in agricultural research for development.

ACIAR 2010s



Elevating research and researchers in the Pacific region

Dr Audrey Aumua

When I first started working with ACIAR back in 2016, I was struck by how much time and energy the organisation was investing into building trust and deep relationships with its partners. And for many development organisations in the Pacific region, trustworthy partnerships are key to long-term sustainable development.

At the time, I was Deputy Director-General of the Pacific Community (SPC), and ACIAR and SPC had already been collaborating for more than 2 decades on sustainable agriculture, forestry and fisheries development throughout the Pacific.

A year later, I joined the Policy Advisory Council for international agricultural research, representing SPC and the Pacific region, which gave me an even closer view of the organisation. I have learnt during my time of service on the council that one of ACIAR's unique attributes is its small size and its ability to respond quickly to the development research space.

As ACIAR marks its 40th anniversary, it's timely to reflect on what makes its partnerships so effective, and whether they will withstand the challenges we face in coming decades.

There are many development funding organisations and researchers working in the Pacific, but ACIAR has always stood out from the crowd, its team of scientists constantly working hard to ensure all stakeholders in any partnership benefit from the arrangement. It shares data and research findings, and devises and supports research agendas in consultation with its partners.

One of the things I think the Centre does particularly well is identifying a potential partnership and then working carefully and methodically to build a partnership model that suits both ACIAR and its partner.

Working in the Pacific region

I have witnessed this approach in the way ACIAR works across various levels of government in the Pacific. For example, the Centre is a core contributor and partner to the Pacific Islands Ministers of Agriculture and Fisheries Forum, and its work with the

Forum has helped it better understand the research needs, aspirations, and technological and scientific issues facing Pacific countries.

It has been a critical partner in the establishment of the Pacific Week of Agriculture in the region supporting countries to showcase their research and science.

It might sound like an obvious way of going about things. However, in the Pacific, it is rarer than you would think despite being vitally important to the region's ability to advance its own research agendas and make sound policy decisions.



Dr Audrey Aumua.



More recently, ACIAR has been doing more capacity building, working with researchers on the ground in a more pragmatic way, and offering scholarships to researchers. It is also now starting to help grow in-country technical capacity, vital in an era of digitisation and innovation in the agricultural and fisheries spaces, and elsewhere.

Prepared for change

But the world is changing, not least because of climate change, which is expected to have a big impact on our fisheries and agriculture, and on the health and living

There are many development funding organisations and researchers working in the Pacific, but ACIAR has always stood out from the crowd, its team of scientists constantly working hard to ensure all stakeholders in any partnership benefit from the arrangement.

standards of all people, but especially those living in the developing world. In the Pacific, the context in which the region operates is changing especially dramatically.

Just as the world isn't standing still, ACIAR will have to change and adapt to new conditions and new challenges.

A prime example of ACIAR's ability to react to new conditions is the coconut project it undertook with SPC during 2019.

Coconuts are an important economic and subsistence crop in the Pacific region, with almost every part of

the coconut palm used either as a nutritious food, or for oil, fibre and wood. The fruit is also an important source of export revenue for the region.

However, all of that is at risk thanks to climate change, which is affecting coconut plantations via higher temperatures and changes in rainfall, which in turn, are attracting more weeds, pests and disease.

ACIAR and SPC have been looking at how to protect and bolster the genetic diversity of coconut palms to ensure rural communities can continue to benefit from this vital resource.

I don't think I can overstate how important it is for developing countries that ACIAR continues to expand its research agenda around the big issues we face, such as oceans and fisheries, climate change and food


security. IT research, development and application must also remain on the agenda.

Maintaining women in science

ACIAR support for women in STEM is commendable but let's not stop there. The importance of ensuring there are more women involved in scientific research, a field traditionally dominated by men, is an issue close to my heart.

Today women earn an estimated 57% of all university degrees but only 35% of scientific degrees. And they represent only 22% of the scientific workforce. How many innovations and breakthroughs have been lost because women don't get the encouragement they need to explore science?

In the Pacific, an approach that could underpin all this work—promoting women in research, working with universities to build research capacity, continuing to offer information and IT training courses—is the progression of a regional research agenda for the Pacific, rather than individual agendas for each country. Only that way can we talk about the big issues facing the region and navigate funding and investment through partners.

Congratulations to ACIAR on 40 years of support for collaborative international research. Here's hoping we continue to head into the future, hand-in-hand. 

About the author

Dr Audrey Aumua is a member of the Policy Advisory Council for international agricultural research. Dr Aumua is the Chief Executive of Fred Hollows Foundation NZ. From 2016 to 2021, she was Deputy Director General at the Pacific Community (SPC), promoting the use of science and technology to support smart policy development and create a more resilient Pacific. She has also worked for the World Health Organization as a Country Director and was a board member for Pacific Women Shaping Development.



Planting seeds for the future

Dr Harry Nesbitt

Around 2010, I was in Timor-Leste, and a woman living in a small, thatched roof house beckoned my colleagues and I over. 'I was able to buy those chairs with my first sale of Seeds of Life sweet potatoes,' she said proudly. 'I never had those before.' It was very endearing.

At that point, it had been about 5 years since ACIAR started distributing seeds and planting material on the ground in Timor-Leste as part of the Seeds of Life project. I served as a reviewer then eventually a program coordinator in different phases of the project, which had a goal to improve food security through increased productivity of major food crops, such as sweet potatoes and cassava. In response to low seed stocks in 2000, the most appropriate of the world's best crop varieties were introduced. Testing these varieties under a range of environments in Timor-Leste was a time-consuming process requiring scientific rigour. Thousands of on-farm trials were conducted. The farmers themselves chose which varieties they wanted to grow and eat. Newly released maize varieties increased yields by 50% and some new sweet potato varieties doubled yields over their traditional varieties. Over time, the farmers certainly came to trust and value ACIAR.

In my experience, providing a strong scientific perspective is what makes ACIAR stand out in the crowded international development space. Even before Timor-Leste officially became an independent country in 2002, ACIAR was able to leverage its partnerships with various CGIAR centres to provide germplasm and other assistance to help Timor-Leste strengthen its agricultural development sector. That's something that other development projects would've found difficult to do.

Throughout my 35-year career in development agriculture, I've worked for the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and other organisations. Although those institutions help fund the CGIAR centres, they don't have a direct scientific interaction with the centres, whereas ACIAR does. I think that's reflected not only in the operation of ACIAR projects, but also their impact evaluation. ACIAR projects are designed to have a long-lasting scientific impact, which is probably not so strong in projects funded by other organisations. That's one of the advantages

of working in an ACIAR project and the results speak for themselves. When Seeds of Life ended in 2016, it had helped over 65,000 farming families gain access to 19 improved varieties of high-yielding certified seed for food crops.

The project was also key to helping ACIAR achieve one of its objectives—developing a trusting long-term relationship with Timor-Leste's Ministry of Agriculture



Dr Harry Nesbitt (L) with research station staff in Timor-Leste.




and Fisheries. ACIAR prefers to engage with country partners on a long-term basis in part because the real benefits of agricultural research can only be maximised over the long haul. Seeds of Life was a great opportunity because after launching in 2000, it continued for 16 years. In that time, the project was instrumental in building up Timor-Leste's scientific infrastructure and human resources. We helped to develop a couple of excellent research stations, provided equipment, constructed buildings and developed the seed cleaning systems, among other things.

Importantly, between 2006 and 2015, Seeds of Life trained 2,600 people, including farmers, NGO staff, employees from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, and others. That way the local government had the capacity to continue to multiply and distribute seeds even after the project ended. We also helped to develop capacity on Timor-Leste's national seed system and was instrumental in the formulation of a national seed policy.

I think the legacy in agricultural projects that I've worked on is always in the personnel. As long as you have trained personnel who have the capacity to continue to do the research and seek modification when needed then you've got a long-term legacy whose impact stretches beyond just one project. I've seen that impact play out over the years. Some of the personnel we trained in Seeds of Life have worked on subsequent development projects for ACIAR, the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and others.

With ACIAR there's a tendency to work closely with partner countries to design a project, build up the local government's scientific capacity then support local groups in actually implementing the project.

Ultimately, ACIAR distinguishes itself by not having a typical development attitude. When a developed country provides aid to a developing country, the project would likely be designed, funded and overseen by the developed country, its government and associated agencies. But sometimes, implementation may not go exactly the way developing countries want it to go.

ACIAR has carved out its own niche in Timor-Leste and other developing countries by not enforcing a pre-packaged project. With ACIAR there's a tendency to work closely with partner countries to design a project, build up the local government's scientific capacity then support local groups in actually implementing the project. It's a slightly different attitude to the status quo, but an important one that has characterised the numerous projects I've worked on and I hope will continue to define ACIAR for years to come. 

About the author

Dr Harry Nesbitt was the Australian coordinator of the Seeds of Life projects (2000–2015) in Timor-Leste, through the University of Western Australia.





Looking forward from a strong foundation

Dr Brendan Brown

Over the past 40 years, ACIAR has achieved many things and now finds itself recognised as a renowned agency leading the charge for more productive and sustainable smallholder farming systems. As someone who has observed, participated in, led, and evaluated ACIAR investments across Asia, Africa and the Middle East for more than a decade, ACIAR holds a special place in my heart. Working across other development funders such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and USAID has also given me a perspective of and pride in Australia's special place in the global agricultural research sphere.

It is interesting to speculate about what the next decades hold for a small, targeted agency like ACIAR, which has built a niche in funding research for development as opposed to specific development interventions. This model has paved the way for investment in scientifically rigorous projects alongside the development of local research capacity, building a solid foundation for the future.

However, we must not kid ourselves about what we now face. Thanks to climate change, the coming years – not decades – will test the resiliency of smallholder agricultural systems. Add in layers of cultural and dietary change, urban migration and sustained societal pressure to drive down food prices, and the viability of smallholder agriculture is more challenged than ever. In an era that may no longer value farming as a meaningful and viable livelihood, it remains to be seen who the farmers of the next generation will be.

Even with emerging genetic innovations it is unlikely we will witness a 'Green Revolution 2.0' driven by genetic innovation. Future system intensification will be more complex; productivity gains will need to involve practice change and wider diversity within farming units, and profitability will need to be driven by wider integration beyond the farming unit (not forgetting that not all smallholder farmers want both, which will make it progressively more complex for extension and research programming).

There is a justified focus on ensuring no one is left behind by grounding our work in fairness and equity, raising difficult questions about where to focus our energies in a morally responsible way.

So, what does this mean for the future of ACIAR? What are the 'big-picture' activities that might transform ACIAR to new heights.

A pathway for research outputs

How might projects move away from the mad rush to 'scale' our research outputs in the final year? I often wonder if we could achieve more by not solely focusing on local policy integration but obtaining 'buy-in' from development partners like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the International Fund for Agricultural Development. I would love to see a more formalised relationship between ACIAR, as a knowledge creator, and development partners, as knowledge extenders. This would also consolidate the important niche ACIAR fills as a discoverer of new science to inform development and policy activities, while ensuring knowledge transitions into use on a wider scale with the far greater resources available to development partners. Perhaps a 'scaling' research program could fulfil this role.

ACIAR Learn as a renowned and respected learning zone

It is encouraging to see ACIAR Learn emerging as a space for ACIAR alumni to learn new skills. I can imagine a world where, if you want to learn how to conduct an element of agricultural research for development, ACIAR Learn has a module for you. This might be anything from grant writing to agronomy





Dr Brendan Brown.

trial design, from semi-structured impact assessment to data analysis and policy engagement.

This would help standardise ACIAR projects and promote cross learning and regional interaction, and could be used by others, such as students from Australian and overseas universities, to upskill. We could also predicate projects on staff becoming accredited as 'master-trainers' to extend the knowledge beyond direct online participants.

Funding mentoring and knowledge transfer

As a graduate of the Australia Youth Ambassadors for Development program, I recognise that one of

Diverse relationships nurture new ideas and connections that are often long-lasting. This does not imply a global ACIAR research agenda, but that ACIAR could support new relationships and interactions by bringing together diverse audiences to learn and interact.

its key design features is pairing recruits with in-country individuals, who then work together daily. The aim is that by the end of a posting, in-country skills have been raised to a level that makes the youth ambassador role redundant.

What if a similar model became a focus within ACIAR projects, especially given the high proportion of tertiary educators that are part of the ACIAR system? The aim would be not only to create research outputs but also to build local capacity so

that local institutions can continue working after the project is completed.

Relationship brokers – but not just the Asia-Pacific

I feel blessed to have worked around multiple global geographies and I have benefitted from sharing experiences and comparisons between them. While funding and politics dictate the need to prioritise South-East Asia and the Pacific region, ACIAR could fill a global role brokering relationships, including with Africa and Latin America. Diverse relationships nurture new ideas and connections that are often long-lasting. This does not imply a global ACIAR research agenda, but that ACIAR could support new relationships and interactions by bringing together diverse audiences to learn and interact.



Cross-cutting research programs

Every ACIAR project will need to measure its impact and explore intended and unintended outcomes and contextual barriers. Given this, I would love to see 'social systems' and 'impact assessment' research programs as overarching and cross-cutting programs within the ACIAR organisational structure. This would start to harmonise the broad investments from ACIAR to enable a much deeper understanding of how to plan, monitor and measure research activities and impact.

This does not mean these programs do not warrant their own research projects; but there is so much more we could learn through a synergised approach. How much more powerful would the investments from ACIAR be if we had a standardised impact assessment and could talk about the relevant social implications of our work? This would also help transition scaling work much earlier in the project cycle and open broader research questions to plan for impact.

Strengthening already strong links to tertiary education

We know the Australian tertiary sector underpins ACIAR activities, but this could be expanded. Some undergraduate agriculture courses already include overseas trips, but some ACIAR projects could formalise this for annual study trips to collaborate directly with projects.

ACIAR could also provide more networking opportunities for postgraduate researchers working on ACIAR projects, such as with a bi-annual ACIAR postgraduate conference. The networks formed would ensure and strengthen the Crawford Fund's Researchers in Agriculture for International Development network, and beyond.

It's all food for thought. Happy 40th birthday ACIAR and congratulations to everyone who contributes to our collective vision for more productive, sustainable and meaningful smallholder livelihoods. 🌱

About the author

Dr Brendan Brown is a Community Development Researcher based in Nepal working for the International Centre for Maize and Wheat Improvement (CIMMYT), as part of the CGIAR. His current projects focus on sustainable intensification across the Eastern Gangetic Plains of South Asia and Cambodia. Dr Brown also participated in the ACIAR graduate program.





Australian Government
Australian Centre for
International Agricultural Research



Recognising

40

YEARS

Throughout 2022, we're sharing stories and recognising our past and current staff, partners and stakeholders across our 40-year journey. Join us and explore some of the stories we have already shared and keep an eye out for what's coming across the rest of the year.

Impact assessment

The 100th edition of the ACIAR Impact Assessment series has been published and details the impact of ACIAR-funded work in agricultural research for development from 1982 to 2022.

➔ www.aciar.gov.au/publication/technical-publications/impact-assessment-100_1982-2022

Social media

We're already talking about **#ACIAR40** and we'd love to hear from you. Share your stories from your involvement across the 40 years of ACIAR and tag us.

Coming soon

Web

40 Years of ACIAR subsite will include our 'ACIAR @ 40' web page for links to all information about our 40-year celebration.

Photos

You will soon be able to flick through our curated selection of 40 photos for 40 years where you will see some familiar faces from the past and be reminded of past research and its impact.

Book

Our centrepiece publication will celebrate 40 years of ACIAR and feature a selection of outstanding projects, partners and people from across the ACIAR network.

ACIAR Voices

You will be able to listen to ACIAR luminaries in a podcast sharing their oral histories and experiences of ACIAR since the 1980s.

Insights

Three senior agricultural research-for-development leaders exploring the role of partnerships to undertake research for mutual benefit and increase impact.



40
YEARS



Australian Centre
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**Australian
Aid**

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) is part of Australia's international development cooperation program. Its mission is to achieve more productive and sustainable agricultural systems for the benefit of developing countries and Australia. ACIAR commissions collaborative research between Australian and developing-country researchers in areas where Australia has special research competence. ACIAR also administers Australia's contribution to the international agricultural research centres.