ACIAR project guidance note:

Project performance monitoring plans (PPMP)

Background

The ACIAR Ten-Year Strategy (2018 – 2027) indicated ACIAR would continue to build the organisational learning culture, broaden the range of impacts ACIAR is able to report on, and improve our ability to assess and communicate performance and results at the portfolio level. In response, ACIAR has developed a Performance and Results Framework (PRF) that specifies what information ACIAR will collect, learn from, and report on at the project, program, and portfolio level.

This framework architecture is broadly divided into two key streams – 1) project performance management and 2) the collection of evidence on development results. Design, implementation and monitoring of project performance is the key responsibility of the Project Leader, with oversight from the commissioning RPM.

Figure 1 highlights in orange the elements of the ACIAR Performance and Results Framework that relate to the project performance stream. Resourcing for these elements will need to be allocated from the overall research budget in discussion with commissioning Research Program Managers (RPM).
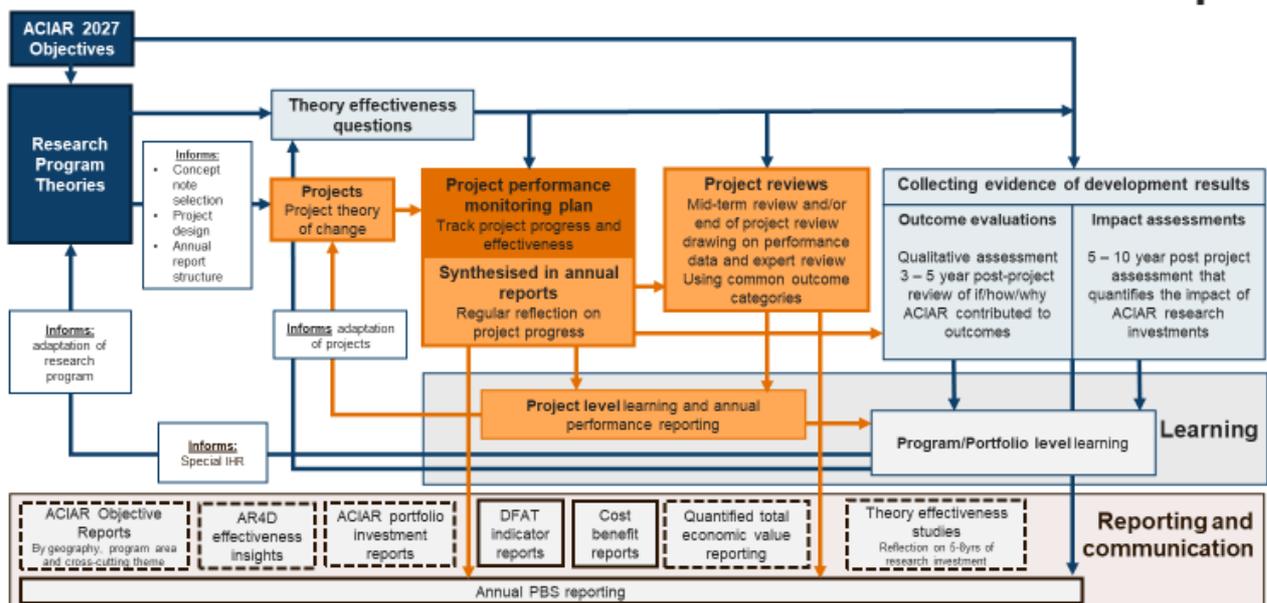

Figure 1: Elements of the ACIAR Performance and Results Framework that relate to project performance

ACIAR approach to performance monitoring

Agricultural research for development is context-specific and problem-oriented. ACIAR's priority in project monitoring is documenting how any new knowledge generated is translated into change in the real world and how the research is designed and managed in ways that will maximise the project's chance of contributing to the change it hopes to affect.

To ensure that a project is planning to monitor and report on the most useful and relevant information, ACIAR requires projects to explicitly link their project monitoring to a theory of change. A theory of change is a fundamental conceptual tool that should form the backbone of the project performance monitoring plans (PPMP). The theory of change seeks to explain *who* will be doing *what* differently and *why* because of the project activities. To be useful, a theory of change needs to consider: **1) Relevance** – significance and usefulness of the research problems, objectives, processes and findings; **2) Credibility** – robustness of the findings and the dependability of the sources of knowledge; **3) Legitimacy** –fairness and ethics of the research processes, and; **4) Effectiveness** – findings are positioned to stimulate actions that address the problem and contribute to solutions and innovations.

In addition to determining and substantiating the project's contributions to desired outcomes, a key function of performance monitoring in ACIAR is to produce the information RPMs and project teams need to adaptively manage in complex and dynamic contexts common across our research portfolio.

Roles and responsibilities in monitoring and evaluation

ACIAR shares responsibility with project teams for project monitoring and evaluation.

ACIAR takes responsibility for:

- determining organisational, programmatic and national/regional research strategies
- identifying individual research concepts that have a place in these cascading/complementary strategies
- assessing the post-project adoption of innovations and contribution to intended outcomes
- assessing the long-term impact of research and capacity building initiatives

ACIAR relies on our commissioned organisations and project teams to:

- articulate the contribution that the project expects to make to ACAIR strategies in a defined geography **during the project period**
- provide an **assessment of the current state** of knowledge, behaviour, and/or practice that can be used as a baseline to assess intended long-term changes based on project interventions
- demonstrate that there is a **clear testable theory of change** about how and why their research activities will contribute to desired changes in a given context
- bring the in-depth knowledge and understanding of the **operating context and next users**, the systems they operate in and their drivers and motivations
- deliver high-quality research
- substantiate **the contribution that the project has made** to the operating context at the end of the project
- **identify lessons** about what worked and didn't in terms of knowledge translation in that context

At a minimum, all projects need to design and monitor those activities that fall within their sphere of **control, this includes:**
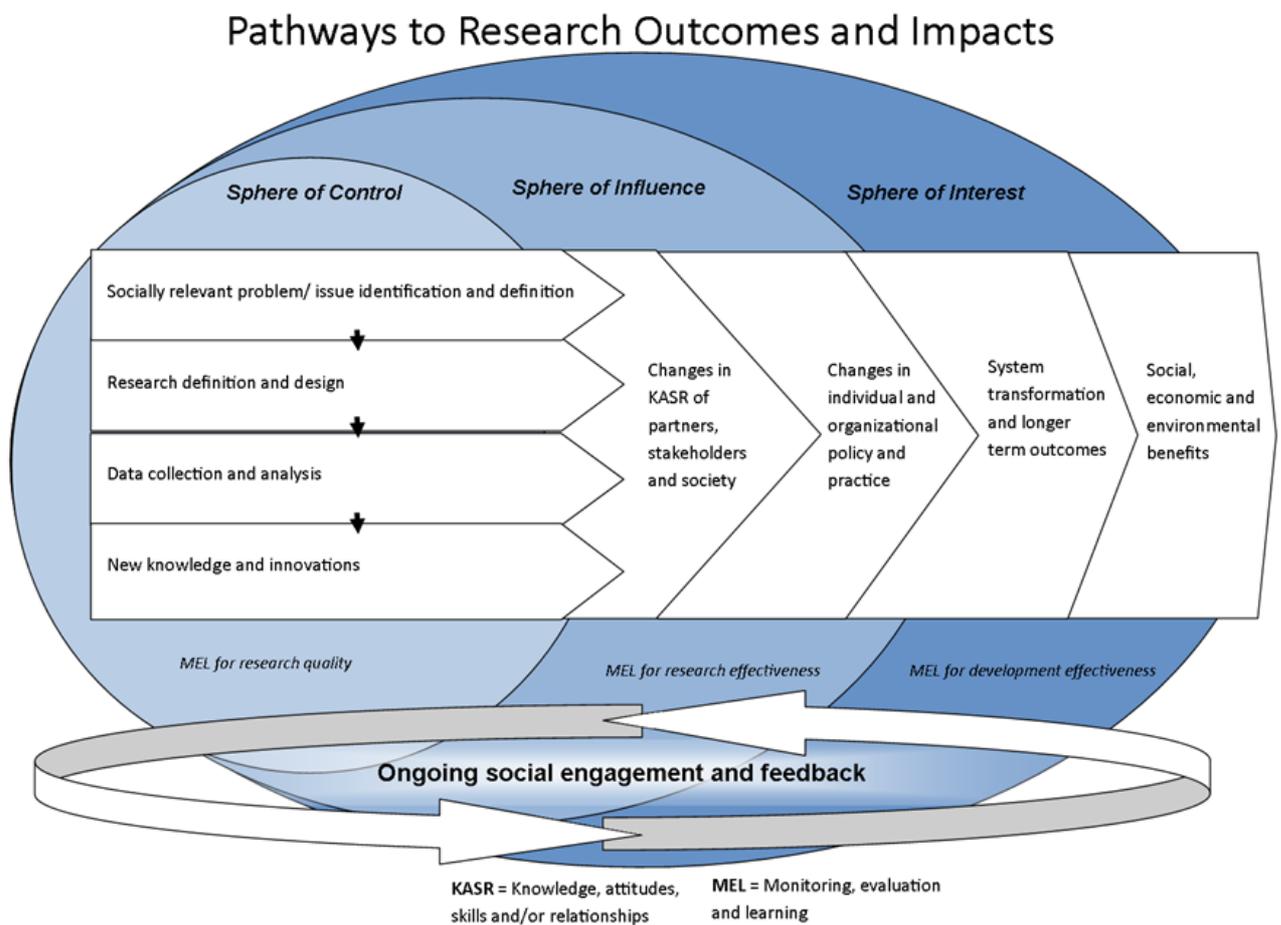
- Research process quality and appropriateness to intended outcomes
- Research deliverables
- Engagement activities

The lower level outcomes in their sphere of influence

- Changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills and or relationships (KASR) in next users

Although judgement will need to be exercised in relation to each project, Figure 2 provides generic guidance on what projects should be monitoring for in their Sphere of Control, versus what they should be supporting ACIAR to evaluate in the longer term (i.e. factors in their Sphere of Influence and Sphere of Interest)

Figure 2: Expectations of project monitoring plans

Pathways to Research Outcomes and Impacts

https://researcheffectiveness.ca/conceptualizing-research-outcomes-and-impacts/

Purpose of a project performance monitoring plan

ACIAR expects all projects to develop and implement an outcome-oriented, project performance monitoring plan (PPMP). At a minimum, this monitoring plan should demonstrate how a project intends to monitor and report on the intended activities and outcomes identified in the project document and theory of change, with particular reference to the implementation of the project gender and capacity-building strategies.

The PPMP should lay out how the project team intends to generate evidence:

1. for annual reporting
2. for end of project report
3. to support mid-term and end of project reviews
4. to support an eventual outcome evaluation
5. to support an eventual quantitative impact assessment.

The information needs for each of these products should be discussed with the commissioning RPM during project proposal development to ensure that their specific expectations are met through the PPMP.

Scope of PPMP

ACIAR commissions projects that operate across the research-to-development spectrum. A key part of the project design process is the dialogue between commissioning RPMs and Project Leaders that defines the scope and expectations of each project investments' contribution to development outcomes.

This agreed scope should inform the ambition of outcomes articulated in the research project theory of change and the appropriate gender and capacity building strategies the project will implement. This scope and the associated products will inform the content of the PPMP.

It is important to note that while ACIAR expects projects to plan for the data needs of future evaluations and impact assessments, the project team are not responsible for the design, resourcing, commissioning or management of these products.

ACIAR expects projects to reach an agreement with their commissioning RPM on the proportionality of their investment in project monitoring. At a minimum, ACIAR expects the investment to be adequate to enable evidence-informed, adaptive management during the project and equip reviewers with credible information about observed outcomes. Depending on the circumstances and RPM expectations, 'credible' information may range from systematically collected observational data to structured survey tools or secondary statistical data.

Evidence required in annual reports

In annual reports, project teams will be asked to undertake two key tasks; one that is reflective and one that relates to reporting progress. Firstly, project teams will be asked to reflect on their current theory of change, capacity and gender strategies, the health of project partnerships and the robustness of their PPMP. Secondly, the project team will be asked to report on the delivery of planned project activities and intended project outcomes.

When reporting project activities, the project team will be required to update the activity table included in the final project document. An example of the table that projects will need to complete is included below (Table 1).

Table 1: Example activity table

No.	Activity	Output(s)	Delivery date of output	Progress in previous reporting period	Progress in this reporting period
1.1					
1.2					
1.3					

When reporting on outcomes, projects will need to produce a narrative summary of progress against intended outcomes and provide supporting evidence for the summary statements. An example of the table that projects will need to complete is included below (Table 2).

Table 2: Example results table

Outcome	Results summary	Evidence
Intermediate outcomes		

Outcome	Results summary	Evidence
End of project outcomes		

Project teams will also be prompted to report on the implementation and resulting outcomes of their gender and capacity building strategies and any unexpected outcomes.

To support ACIAR communication with external stakeholders, project teams will also be asked to identify and document a story of significant change that has been observed in the last 12 months. These stories should illustrate a change linked to an intended project outcome. Further guidance on what is expected in this story can be found in the annual report template.

The PPMP will provide the Research Program Manager with the details of the type of evidence that the project team intends to produce for the different intended outcomes and how they intend to generate this information.

Evidence required for the final report

Annual reports are designed to provide the commissioning RPM with the information needed to adaptively manage a project. The final report should act as a summative document of record regarding the project's contribution to science, development outcomes and research for development practice. In addition to the performance information included in the annual report, in relation to project performance, final project reports will need to document:

- The final version of the project theory of change that incorporates the insights the project has gained about how change has occurred in this context
- The final summary of the contribution the project has made towards the intended end of project outcomes
- A reflection of what the project learned about how knowledge is translated for use in this context
- An updated list of all research personnel engaged in the project, disaggregated by gender
- An updated list of all aligned research students who engaged with the project
- An updated list of all JAFs or Pacific scholarships awarded or pending the outcome of an application at the time of the project closure
- An updated list of scientific publications and grey-literature knowledge products, including the gender of key authors

Evidence required for mid-term and end of project reviews

At the mid-term and end of project, the commissioning RPM will undertake a review of the project. These may be led in-house or contracted to an external reviewer.

Project Leaders will need to discuss any specific expectations for the mid-term and end of project reviews with the commissioning RPMs. These expectations may be known at the time of project design or may need to be discussed with the project team in the 12 months leading up to a scheduled review.

In preparation for the mid-term review, the standard expectations will be for the project team to provide external reviewers with all annual reports and the supporting evidence on outcomes as well as their gender and capacity building strategy implementation. In addition, the reviews will inquire as to the project's relevance and effectiveness and facilitate a reflection of the key assumptions articulated in the project design document.

In preparation for the end of project review, generally the project team will need to complete a draft final report and make all outcomes information available to the reviewer. End of project reviewers are asked to rate the performance of the project in relation to achievement of intended project outcomes and implementation of the gender strategy. These scores are aggregated for use in annual ACIAR reporting to Treasury. As these ratings form the basis of one of the key metrics ACIAR uses to justify the effective use of public funds, it is important that the evidence supporting these conclusions is robust, transparent and accessible to ACIAR.

The commissioning research program manager may also have specific information needs related to overarching development effectiveness questions that should be accommodated in the PPMP. If this is the case, these should be made clear to the research team when the PPMP is being developed.

Gender

At the **end of the project,** the reviewer will be asked to assess:

- the clarity of the project team's gender strategy at design
- the extent to which this was implemented throughout the project
- how did the project respond to the different needs of women and girls during research scoping? How have women been involved in project implementation? What efforts have been made to plan for the differential effects on women and men resulting from the adoption of research outputs?

There will need to be adequate documentation at design and sufficient monitoring and reporting during the project for the team to be confident that their intention and quality of work in this area are assessable by an external reviewer.

Capacity building

At the **end of the project,** the reviewer will be asked to assess:

- the clarity of the project team's capacity building strategy at design
- the extent to which this was implemented throughout the project
- how did the capacity building activities support individual and organisational performance and achievement toward the project outcomes? how effective were the capacity building activities in strengthening a culture of research collaboration and innovation with and between organisations? What sustainable ongoing capacity building activities and approaches are embedded within partner organisations?

There will need to be adequate documentation at design and sufficient monitoring and reporting during the project for the team to be confident that their intention and quality of work in this area are assessable by an external reviewer.

Evidence required for eventual outcome evaluation

Approximately three years post-project, ACIAR may commission an outcome evaluation. These evaluations are designed to investigate the extent to which ACIAR projects have contributed to short-term development outcomes. These outcome evaluations will work with final versions of the project ToCs (reflecting any updates made during the project) and assess the extent to which the project contributions to intended outcomes were

sustained post project and how these catalysed shorter-term development outcomes. While the outcomes investigated will be determined by the project design and the relevant research program theory, there are generic outcomes that ACIAR anticipates will be evident across the research portfolio. Below is a summary of the different types of generic outcomes that ACIAR will be looking for across different projects. It is not anticipated that all projects will reflect all outcomes. These outcome clusters are a mechanism that will enable ACIAR to communicate ACIAR contributions more easily at the portfolio level to external audiences and to enable cross-case analysis of development effectiveness.

Science

Advancement of science through the production of highly credible quality science research indicated by the following: (i) The project published in peer-reviewed journals AND (ii) X% of outputs are articles published in peer-reviewed local language (where English is not the academic language of the context)

Development of knowledge unique for application in context which includes (i) Development of appropriate science outputs that contribute to application including training manuals, handbooks, technologies AND (ii) Translation of the above science outputs for use by a clearly identified next user.

Socio-economic outcomes

Improved access to social-economic institutions and organisations, (e.g. markets, social organisations, producer groups, cooperatives, unions, etc.) which includes (i) a reduction in barriers to access (i.e. regulatory, logistic, informational), OR (ii) the enhanced capacity to meet requirements for participation (i.e. quality and food safety standards in markets).

Expanded range of social-economic opportunities, which are realistic and appropriate in the context, and includes (i) expanded range of employment opportunities, OR (ii) expanded range of agricultural production options, OR (iii) expanded range of post-harvest value-add options, OR (iv) expanded range of options to extract/harvest natural resources (i.e. forests, fisheries).

Reduced barriers to switching between alternative social-economic activities, which includes (i) reduction in social barriers (e.g. gender norms, stigmas, status, etc.), OR (ii) improved knowledge which facilitates switching (i.e. from cropping to livestock raising), OR (ii) decreased financial barriers to switching (i.e. better access to micro-credit, or improved application of government subsidies), OR (iii) reduced regulatory/legal barriers to switching.

Reduced exposure to risk (e.g. human health risk, production risk, social risk), which includes (i) improved risk management/response, OR (ii) increased avoidance of risks, (iii) OR improved opportunities to mitigate risk through community, government or financial arrangements (i.e. crop insurance).

Increased social-economic returns, (e.g. wellbeing, profits) which for the systems households engage with, includes increased (i) increased benefit flows for same cost outlay, OR (ii) sustainment of benefit flows with decreased cost outlays, OR (iii) increased benefit flows and decreased cost outlays. Examples include (1) 'more with same', such as increased availability of food or resources to the household from the same outlay of effort, (2) 'same with less', labour-saving techniques allow same income to be achieved with less time, and (3) 'more with less', new crop variety generates higher incomes with less labour time and land.

Gender

In relation to the results of project investments at the program level, the big questions that ACIAR would like to be able to answer are:

1. Does gender parity in teams and inclusive practices lead to improved outcomes?
2. Who is benefiting from ACIAR investments?
3. Have ACIAR policies, processes and research activities influenced partner and commissioned organisation gender approaches?

ACIAR is working towards ensuring that adequate information is documented in reports, outcome evaluations and impact assessments to address these questions across the portfolio.

Increased inclusion and opportunity for women and/or diverse SOGIE researchers within the project, in both the Australian and partner country teams, specifically

(i)   project team composed of a minimum of either 40 percent women or men,

(ii)   women and/or diverse SOGIE researchers held position of project leadership,

(iii)   women and/or diverse SOGIE researchers appeared as first author on at least one of the peer-reviewed or conference publications/presentations produced in a relevant and high-ranking journal,

(iv)   women and/or diverse SOGIE researchers were given scholarships and/or training opportunities.

Where appropriate, projects may also be working toward outcomes that include:

Partners identify the project as influencing organisational decisions to adopt gender-inclusive policies and procedures, including: (i) a clear gender strategy, (ii) HR policies are gender-sensitive, (iii) representation of women &/or SOGIE researchers has increased in the higher-level functions within an organisation

The generation of gender-sensitive knowledge, which includes gender-specific publications and/or publications that include gender-disaggregated data, and there is evidence that the research has been translated for use at (i) the project level, (ii) the organisational level, (iii) the community[1] level.

Positive socio-economic outcomes women and/or diverse SOGIE community members, which includes: (i) improved access to social-economic institutions and organisations, (e.g. markets, social organisations, producer groups, cooperatives, unions, etc.), (ii) expanded range of social-economic opportunities, which are realistic and appropriate in the context, (iii) reduced barriers to switching between alternative social-economic activities (iv) reduced exposure to risk, (e.g. human health risk, production risk, social risk), (v) increased social-economic agency, (vi) Improved social-economic equity (i.e. an improvement in an individual's equity share in their outputs).

Policy

Implementation of a policy that informed stakeholders acknowledge draws on ACIAR supported research, which is evident (i) in such a way that observable changes in state can be determined to be positive AND (ii) qualitative evaluations with a deliberate sample that demonstrate an acknowledged contribution to the policy process of a piece of research and analysis of the impact of these policies.

Direct referencing of research in publicly available policy documents, which include (i) reference to technical manuscripts (ii) sections of ACIAR support research text directly incorporated into policy (iii) footnoting of research documents in formal policy papers OR (iv) reference to ACIAR supported research in Ministerial statements and/or speeches.

Policy actors acknowledge that there was a contribution to the policy formation process from the research outputs, which includes an acknowledgement by policymakers in (i) impact Evaluation interviews that the research was 'one of many influences' (ii) emails and other written communication received by researchers from individual policy actors demonstrating engagement with research.

The research team self-reports that policy-relevant findings were produced and communicated to known actors within the policy-making realm, which includes the following activities being undertaken during the life of the project: (i) policy dialogues convened; (ii) policy briefs produced and distributed (iii) high-level stakeholder meetings held to discuss policy-relevant findings.

Improved Natural Resource Management outcomes

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[1] Community here refers to all persons in the region where the project took place but outside of the immediate project activities

Reduced production and/or better management of pollutants, which includes (i) reduction in the use of harmful chemicals (herbicides, pesticides etc.), (ii) reduction in the overuse/run-off of nutrients, OR (iii) reduced discharge and/or better management of wastewater.

More efficient and sustainable use of available water resources, which includes (i) growing more food using less water (reducing agricultural water demand), OR (ii) reducing groundwater depletion.

Increased natural resource stocks, which includes (i) improved soil health (i.e. improved soil structure, pH level, nutrient levels) (ii) increased forest/vegetation cover OR (iii) increased wild aquatic species stocks.

Increased ecological resilience, which includes (i) increased or restored ecosystem biodiversity (including increased soil carbon), OR (ii) rehabilitated ecosystems (i.e. coral reef systems/wetlands).

Improved Biosecurity, which includes (i) better management of pests & diseases (animal, plant and human).

Improved climate change mitigation, which includes (i) an observed improvement of natural resources (i.e., increased forest cover, improved soil carbon), OR (ii) a reduced energy consumption (e.g. solar water pumps), OR (iii) establishment of new climate mitigation incentive schemes, support mechanism, extension at an institutional level.

Establishment of a Sustainable Natural Resource Management system, which includes the institutionalising and implementation of sustainable practices and management of natural resources (i.e. groundwater systems, salinity management, forest resources, waterways, biodiversity).

Capacity building

Enhanced individual capacity achieved for the project team members, which includes (i) improved skills development of the individual, OR (ii) career progression for an individual (i.e. a promotion), OR an individual on the project team was awarded an ACIAR fellowship including a John Allwright Fellowship, Pacific Scholarship or John Dillon Fellowship, OR (iv) an individual gains an external grant for professional development, OR (v) an individual is formally part of a mentor program with senior academics in Australia, OR (vi) ACIAR funded individuals are contributing in the international research for development space.

Improved capacity of implementing partners at an organisational level, which includes (i) improved processes and procedures, OR (ii) improved human resources procedures, OR (iii) the organisation has developed a clear strategy, OR (iii) the team has the appropriate skill set for the work, OR (iv) stronger organisational leadership is demonstrated, OR (iv) strengthened culture of research innovation and collaboration is demonstrated

Improved capacity of groups and/or individuals in the local community who were members of the project team (i.e. directly engaged people within the target community), which includes (i) improved skills development within the engagement target area of the project; (ii) completion of training programs (including work placements) as part of the project that are relevant to their employment/ daily activities, OR (iii) completion of a formal qualification relevant to their employment/ daily activities

Improved capacity of groups and/or individuals in the local community who were not directly engaged with the project, including (i) the community has increased knowledge and resources relevant to the environment, OR (ii) the community has improved skills to continue the project.

Evidence required for eventual quantitative impact assessment

In discussion with the commissioning RPM, the research team should establish whether there are quantitative variables that ACIAR needs the project to collect in order support ex-post impact assessment work. The commissioning RPM will make a judgement as to i) whether the project design and method is appropriate to support quantitative analysis that requires pre and post sampling and ii) whether variables that align with specific values ACIAR are interested in measuring systematically across the portfolio are present in the research design. These values are aligned with ACIAR 2027 Objectives and the associated variables will seek to establish the quantum of value that ACIAR has delivered in relation to these objective areas. The values that ACIAR will be looking to quantify are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: ACIAR Objectives disaggregated for evaluability

The ultimate value sought from ACIAR investment
Enhanced human nutrition
Improved food security among smallholder farmers and rural communities
Improved women's control of assets, resources and decision making
Reduced poverty among smallholder farmers and rural communities
Reduced environmental impact from the management of food systems
Reduced environmental impact from the management of resource systems
Reduced risks to human health