



ACIAR response to the Mid-Term Review of the ACIAR 10-Year Strategy 2018-2027

We thank the Chair and Mid-term Review Panel Members for their report and recommendations.

Leading up to and during the week that the Panel spent at ACIAR House (7 to 11 March 2022) the Panel spoke with approximately 120 internal and external stakeholders, considered 26 submissions, including an extensive submission from ACIAR and reviewed a diverse and extensive set of background documentation.

In our assessment the report addresses the Terms of Reference for the review.

We welcome the broad affirmation in the report of:

- the regard in which ACIAR is held by stakeholders across the region and the value delivered by ACIAR
- the continued relevance of the 10-year strategy despite very significant change in our operating environment
- the overarching efficiency and effectiveness of the agency
- the impressive progress that has been made against some important elements of the ACIAR 10-Year Strategy 2018–2027, including ME&L (monitoring, evaluation and learning), capacity building programs and outreach.

The 14 recommendations are clear, thorough, and actionable and cover a diverse range of issues and responses.

This document provides a response to each of the 14 formal recommendations.

We are actioning many of these recommendations through six strategic changes (below). These are referenced in appropriate places through the document.

Professor Andrew Campbell
CEO
02 November 2022

Strategic Changes in response to mid-term review of the ACIAR strategy

Strategic Change 1: Transformational research initiatives for food system resilience

By July 2025, we will manage 30% of our bilateral research and capacity building investments as mission-directed, transdisciplinary and cross-program initiatives. These initiatives will target transformational change in food systems characterised by high levels of uncertainty.

Strategic Change 2: More efficient commissioning of projects

By July 2023, we will redesign our commissioning and contracting processes, while not compromising the quality of project design and planning, to ensure that by 2025 at least 90% of projects proceed from project concept note approval to legally committed project activity within 12 months. Current average is more than two years.

Strategic Change 3: Next generation partnerships

By 2027, we will transition our major partner country and regional relationships into new partnership models which reflect the growing research and leadership strengths of our country partners and maximise the mutual benefit achieved from international research collaborations between Australian and country partner institutions.

Strategic Change 4: A strategic role in the Australian Government's evolving international engagement

Over the next five years we will increase our visibility in, and deepen our partnerships with, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW). In doing so we will focus on our distinctive role in effective delivery of Official Development Assistance and informing strategic policy on global change in agriculture, food systems and climate.

Strategic Change 5: Preferred partner in the Australian innovation system

Over the next five years we will position ACIAR to be a continued partner of choice for universities, state government agencies, CSIRO, research and development corporations and the private sector. We will contribute to the continued development of the Australian agricultural innovation system through strategic research investment and brokering connections to international collaborators and opportunities.

Strategic Change 6: Maximising the value of our multilateral investments

Over the next five years we will strengthen our partnerships with multilateral agricultural research-for-development institutions, such as CGIAR, to build the global public goods which underpin food systems across the Indo-Pacific region. We will broker new approaches for Australia and partner countries to access the capacity, knowledge and assets of these multilateral institutions.

Response to Review Panel Recommendations

Recommendation 1 *That the ACIAR 10-year strategy be reworked to provide clearer linkages between its six objectives and more specifically defined strategies with budget allocations, with appropriate KPIs for its remaining five years in Annual Operational Plans.*

We are currently drafting a second edition the ACIAR 10-Year Strategy 2018–2027 which will:

- reaffirm the core elements of the strategy
- update the context for the strategy
- provide a summary of achievements /outcomes from the first five years of the strategy implementation
- remove content that is now superfluous (either completed actions or changed approaches)
- simplify the presentation and more explicitly connects strategic actions to achieving the six development objectives.

The Strategic Action Plan summarised above will drive implementation of the strategy and will be updated at least annually.

Recommendation 2 *ACIAR consider adopting a framework to assess its development effectiveness, without compromising the quantum of research funding.*

We note the Panel’s assessment of a strong and effective monitoring and evaluation culture and practice in ACIAR. The review recognises good progress in developing processes that of agency Performance and Results Framework (PRF). The PRF provides the foundation for portfolio wide reporting and assessment in relation to the management of ACIAR investments at multiple scales – bi-lateral project, programmatic and capacity building programs.

Given the diversity of contexts and modalities through which ACIAR works, the PRF is structured around cross-cutting assumptions about the relationship between effectively designed and managed research and capacity development initiatives and effective contribution to development outcomes. These assumptions reflect best practice in development as well as research-for-development quality frameworks. They primarily relate to the importance of clear impact pathways, testable hypothesis related to effective research translation and strong monitoring systems and commitment to long-term ex-post evaluation and learning. While noting that ACIAR is a research-for-development rather than a development agency per se, translating these assumptions into an integrative ‘theory of change’ across our research and capacity building investments could contribute to:

- driving improved practice across the portfolio,
- enhancing the evaluability of our investments and
- facilitating clearer communication of our development effectiveness performance.

This may be particularly pertinent in responding to Recommendation 9a. Through Strategic Change 1, we will explore addressing development effectiveness framework as an integral part of that response.

Recommendation 3 *ACIAR increase senior level liaison with government and research agencies within Australia, with a particular focus on DFAT, DAWE, ABARES, DISER, CSIRO, AIA, RDCs, universities and state government departments. A Partnership Health Check with appropriate agencies should be a priority for 2022.*

Our relationships with the listed agencies are diverse and many are undergoing significant change, creating opportunity for new ways of working together on existing ODA commitments and opportunities to add value beyond our core ODA role. Strategic Change 3 will focus strategic attention on these partnerships and maximising the value created.

We conduct formal Partnership Health Checks with partner countries where we have defined partnering arrangements. This broad approach may be appropriate for assessing ACIAR relationships with Australian agencies but needs to be done collaboratively and by mutual agreement.

Recommendation 4 *ACIAR Business Systems Unit and Outreach enhance the utility of the ACIAR public facing project map by disaggregating projects, adding in-design projects and enabling external stakeholders to access some of the ACIAR internal systems, where appropriate.*

Our public-facing project level information is a key resource for many ACIAR stakeholders. Integration of the new website and project management environment has significantly increased the visibility, searchability and completeness of public-facing project level information.

We have initiated an ACIAR Information Management Improvement Project and development of an ACIAR Knowledge Hub to further improve accessibility and utility of these resources.

Consideration of direct access to ACIAR internal systems is within the scope of our current ICT Plan. This has not been implemented to date primarily because of cyber security considerations.

Recommendation 5 *ACIAR maintain the research procurement funding target of 80% and review and adjust budget allocations to find and identify funds in the budget specifically allocated to large integrated transdisciplinary programs. To assist in that process, ACIAR Executive review the quantum and frequency of capacity building programs.*

Subject to unexpected changes to our appropriations or Ministerial direction to the contrary, we will continue to budget 80% of our administered funds for research.

Recommendation 6 *ACIAR Executive implement strategies to ensure organisation wide integration of capacity building, particularly into research programs and projects.*

The Chief Scientist and General Manager Outreach and Capacity Building are working together to ensure that our suite of capacity building programs is, where appropriate, coordinated with the capacity building intent and outcomes of our research programs and projects. Most notably, Strategic Change 1 commits us to 'manage 30% of our research and capacity building investments as mission-directed, transdisciplinary, and cross-program initiatives'.

The Director, Capacity Building will be responsible for leading the implementation in partnership with RPMs.

Recommendation 7 *ACIAR explore adding named researchers on current projects and selected past researchers to the Alumni Network; and initiating an annual program of small grants in capacity building, outreach and research seed funding.*

The Capacity Building Team will explore the merits of adding Australian and international researchers to the Alumni network. Initiating and delivering a funding program targeting researchers would not be dependent on them being classed as ACIAR Alumni.

The Launch Fund currently supports international agricultural researchers to attend conferences and workshops as both presenters and/or delegates. It also supports bespoke workshops that link to current project needs. Prior to COVID-19 a budget of \$300,000 was allocated to supporting Launch Fund activities selected by the Training Committee from a competitive round of applications from project leaders. This funding was supplemented by individual Research Programs, which also supported similar, one-off activities.

Launch Funding has been allocated on an ad hoc basis for the past two years, with several online events supported. The program is due for a refresh and this recommendation provides impetus for this. The Director, Capacity Building will lead this work, working closely with RPMs to ensure integration with research projects.

Careful consideration will need to be given to the capacity building support that can appropriately be made available to Australian researchers using ODA funds. The Outreach and Research programs both currently work with researchers from Australian commissioned organisations in support of opportunities to present at conferences and participate in other public events to communicate the work of ACIAR. This activity usually emerges from collaborative interactions, rather than through a formal funding program that is open for applications.

We are interested in building on the positive response to the Alumni Research Support Facility small grants program through Research Seed Funding for partner country researchers. Such an initiative would need to be designed to facilitate the change initiatives in response to Recommendation 9a and Recommendation 10 with the scope, scale and governance of seed funding reflecting that integration.

Recommendation 8 *ACIAR enhance the relationship with DFAT by establishing a structured timetable of discussions at appropriate levels and an agreed definition of success in the ACIAR DFAT relationship*

We agree that the ACIAR relationship with DFAT is fundamental to ACIAR and requires (and receives) on-going attention ‘zippered’ from the Secretary–CEO relationship down through both organisations. Opportunities to work with DFAT in new ways and on new things is integral to Strategic Change 4. In the first instance this will include a particular focus on opportunities through development of our ‘Transformational Research Initiatives’ (Strategic Change 1).

Recommendation 9a) *Over the next 12 to 24 months, ACIAR prioritise moving to fewer longer term transdisciplinary transformational programs. This move should include a review of the project development and approval steps to streamline the process including addressing delays by providers and partners. Relevant KPIs reflecting progress to an aspirational timeline should be assigned to the CEO and Chief Scientist.*

We are committed to the strategic imperative of more ‘joined up’ investment. It is integral to the 10-year strategy. We acknowledge that progress during the first five years of the 10-year strategy has been slower than needed. Strategic Change 1 commits us to manage 30% of our research and capacity building investments as mission-directed, transdisciplinary, and cross-program initiatives. Initiatives will target transformational change in food systems characterised by high-levels of uncertainty by July 2024. This represents a significant step change in the way we manage our research and capacity building investments, but one that we are excited about.

Recommendation 9 b) *ACIAR reinvigorate its economic and policy capacity as opportunities arise*

The knowledge and technologies that ACIAR-funded research generates translates to development outcomes through a variety of impact pathways including policy change (often at national or provincial scale), practice change (often at farm or household scale) and private sector investment along the value chain.

A significant proportion of the research that we fund can best, or only, lead to development outcomes at scale where at least part of the change that occurs is through policy influence. Policy expertise is therefore critical across our research portfolio. Most programs have projects that address policy settings as a primary research focus, and all have projects where policy influence is a key impact pathway. Nevertheless, we accept that these investments could be more effectively integrated with other research and capacity building investments. We are designing our proposed ‘transformational research initiatives’ (Strategic Change 1) to enable that better integration.

Economics has been, and remains, a key disciplinary input to much of the research that ACIAR funds and to our evaluation of that research. This includes its application to understanding and assessing policy pathways to development outcomes and generating evidence or options to contribute to policy change. But economics is also an important contributor to many other areas of our portfolio. For this reason, we propose to treat the ‘economic and policy capacity’ dimensions of this recommendation as two, separate (but not unrelated) agendas. While there are fewer economists on ACIAR staff than before the strategy, we need to ascertain whether and how this has led to us being a less well ‘informed purchaser’ or manager of economics expertise and put in place investments to mitigate this.

Recommendation 10 *Where capabilities and capacity in developing countries' economies and innovation systems have matured, ACIAR actively seek to devolve greater leadership to country partners in project initiation, delivery and linking with Australian partners, with ACIAR taking a supportive role.*

We agree that it is imperative that as capability and capacity in partner countries develops and deepens, we make commensurate changes to the nature of our partnerships. This includes both devolving leadership roles for ACIAR funded research investments to in-country partners and aligning ACIAR investments to parallel investments initiated, managed and resources by partner countries. This will be an integral part of Strategic Change 3.

Recommendation 11 *ACIAR consider the greater use of in-country technical expertise such as international staff, possibly supported by RAID members.*

We recognise that there are instances where long-term full-time international capability on the ground can be transformational, but we need to be cautious to maintain the balance between domestic and international capability. While our partner countries value the insights and innovation that come from international researchers (and we must not lose that) we should avoid depending on international staff driving projects on the ground and be careful to clearly define the roles of an international in-country technical expertise to complement the role of the Country Offices (noting that the Country Offices deliberately comprise locally engaged expertise for specific strategic reasons, as acknowledged by the Panel).

Nevertheless, implementation of Strategic Change 1 – Transformational Research Initiatives is likely to require technical and leadership roles above and beyond traditional project leadership and team member roles.

Recommendation 12 *ACIAR recommence in country visits as soon as possible and encourage commissioned and contracted organisations to do likewise.*

Agreed. Although travel remains more challenging and costly than prior to the pandemic and improved video conferencing and other tools off-set the need for some travel, in-country visits are an absolute business imperative. RPMs, the Executive, Capacity Building and Outreach are all now travelling again. We are actively engaging with commissioned organisations to ensure that while it is their responsibility to manage travel and travel risks, they are cognisant that many contracted deliverables are contingent on active engagement in-country.

Recommendation 13 a) *ACIAR work within the changing CGIAR arrangements to develop innovative partnerships involving the CGIAR, other stakeholders and Australia's partner countries in South East Asia and the Pacific to respond to major issues of concern, for example, biosecurity threats; food supply, livelihoods, food safety and nutrition in the face of climate change and decreasing water availability while preserving natural capital; and responding to the unique challenges of Pacific small island states. One or more regional collaborations could be set up to deliver these projects.*

b) *ACIAR encourage and facilitate the involvement of Australian government and research institutions in longer term partnerships to assist in the delivery of these major innovative new multi partner, multifaceted collaborations.*

c) *ACIAR retain a small but carefully chosen set of activities in eastern and southern Africa which contribute Australia's scientific expertise and interests to improvements in agroecosystems common to Australia and sub-Saharan Africa.*

Our multilateral investments have been integral to achieving our mission for many years. We will continue to work with the CGIAR through a period of significant change to ensure that that remains the case. This will focus particularly on ensuring effective synergy between our multilateral and bilateral investments. Hence Strategic Change 6: Maximising the value of our multilateral investments.

We will develop innovative partnerships that change the way we work with the multilateral agricultural research-for-development institutions (principally, but not just, CGIAR) to help partner countries in the Indo-Pacific to respond to food supply and livelihoods challenges, while preserving natural capital.

We agree that ACIAR has a brokering role for engaging Australian expertise into the CGIAR agenda that complements and extends our funding role, particularly for geographies that fall outside Australian ODA target countries where Australian expertise might be relevant.

We continue to invest 10% of our bilateral research funded through administered funds in eastern and southern Africa as per our regional investment mandate and will continue to do so while this remains consistent with Australia's Official Development Assistance policy.

Recommendation 14 *ACIAR use larger research groupings to resource dedicated gender skills and embed them in field activities to facilitate more inclusive research approaches*

The ACIAR agenda on the empowerment of women and girls and gender equity has considerable momentum, as acknowledged by the Panel. We have an active and activist GESI (Gender Equity and Social Inclusion) Committee who are developing a GESI Strategy for ACIAR to follow up on our impactful Gender Strategy (now nearing its end). Gender considerations are now integral to most research projects and their delivery with specific expertise many teams or as advisors to projects. We also played a central role in the establishment of the CGIAR Gender Platform. We played the lead role in convening, delivering and funding the Seeds of Change Conference in 2019. We have established the targeted Meryl Williams Fellowship as well as addressing gender equity across our capacity building investments.

We are committed to building on these foundations by working with partner organisations in Australia and across the region to actively support them to embed gender and social inclusion considerations and skills in what they do.