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AN ASSESSMENT OF ACIAR-FUNDED IARC[1] SPECIAL AND RESTRICTED GRANTS PROJECTS

Roger G. Mauldon[2]

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[1] International Agricultural Research Centre(s)

[2] Economics Consultant, Garran, ACT

This report was commissioned as part of ACIAR's response to an audit review of its Multilateral Sub-program which recommended that it implement evaluations of completed Special Purpose and Restricted Grant projects funded by the International Agricultural Research Centre (IARC) program. Using documentation presented on 26 projects, an assessment was made of:

- the extent to which project outputs and outcomes met project objectives; and
- the extent to which documents addressed the general purpose for which the grants are currently made.

The documents from which the assessments were made were:

- project proposals submitted to ACIAR before funding approval; and
- progress and termination reports provided by project leaders.

Table 1 assesses the projects against these criteria and estimates the degree to which objectives were met by each of the projects.

With respect to the objectives, this report concludes that:

- in most cases objectives were stated in ways that enabled performance to be readily assessed;
- 13 (50%) of the projects unequivocally met all their stated objectives, while a further 7 met most of them; and
- in six cases no firm conclusion could be drawn about the degree to which project objectives had been met.

The extent to which the documents addressed the general purpose for which grants are currently made was assessed separately for each of four criteria used by ACIAR:

1. further Australia's development assistance objectives through international research in the agricultural and natural resource sectors;
2. add value to, and interact with, ACIAR's bilateral program;
3. provide a mechanism for involving advanced Australian research institutions in global programs in ways that the bilateral program cannot do, yielding potential benefit to Australian agriculture and natural resource management; and
4. strengthen effective links to National Agricultural Research Systems' (NARS) programs in ACIAR's target regions or fields of research.

Each criterion was satisfied by, on average, over half of the 26 projects. Twenty of the projects satisfied more than one criterion, and four projects satisfied all four.

The project documentation was usually sufficient to draw conclusions in most cases about whether particular criteria used by ACIAR for making the grants had been met. Nevertheless, the focus of the reporting could be improved. The following five suggestions are made to improve ACIAR's funding and reporting guidelines:

- In order to improve the focus of the projects and the accountability of project leaders, project objectives should be structured along the lines of

– the general outcomes sought;
– the particular outputs expected; and
– the indicators to be used to assess output and outcome performance.

- The expected role of each of the partner institutions, and how relationships between them are expected to develop, should be addressed in project proposals. Termination reports should document the role of each partner in the project and to assess the nature of the linkages between them.
- If associated ACIAR-sponsored bilateral projects are nominated in the project proposal, the termination report should account for whether and how the multilateral project team interacted with the bilateral project team, and/or for how or whether the multilateral project's outputs added value to the outcomes of the bilateral project.
- A condition of project funding should be the acknowledgment, in any publication resulting from the project, of all participating institutions and of ACIAR sponsorship.
- As an incentive to timely termination reports, payment of a small portion of the approved budget should be deferred by ACIAR until it has received an acceptable report.

Table 1 Conclusions about how each project has met its stated objectives and addressed each criterion of the general purpose for which Special/Purpose/ Restricted Grants are made

No.	Were project objectives met? (a)	Did the project value add to ACIAR's bilateral projects (b) Criterion 1	Did the project provide mechanisms for Australian involvement in global programs (b) Criterion 2	Are there potential benefits to Australian Agriculture (b) Criterion 3	Did the project strengthen links to NARS in ACIAR's region? (b) Criterion 4
1	2	yes	no	no	no conclusion
2	3	no	no	yes	yes
3	4	yes	yes	no	yes
4	3	yes	yes	yes	yes
5	3	no	yes	yes	yes
6	4	yes	yes	yes	yes
7	2	yes	yes	yes	yes
8	4	yes	yes	no	yes
9	4	no conclusion	no	no	yes
10	1	no conclusion	yes	no	yes
11	4	no	no conclusion	yes	no
12	4	no	yes	yes	yes
13	4	yes	yes	no	yes
14	2	no	yes	yes	no
15	2	no conclusion	yes	yes	no conclusion
16	2	no	yes	yes	yes
17	3	no conclusion	yes	yes	yes
18	4	yes	yes	yes	yes
19	3	no	yes	no	no
20	4	yes	yes	yes	no conclusion
21	3	yes	yes	yes	no conclusion
22	4	no conclusion	no	no	no conclusion
23	4	yes	no	no	yes
24	4	no	yes	yes	yes
25	4	no	no	no	no conclusion
26	3	yes	no conclusion	no	yes

(a) The ratings on objectives mean:

4 outputs and outcomes met all stated objectives adequately;
3 outputs and outcomes met most stated objectives adequately;
2 outputs and outcomes met about half of the stated objectives adequately;
1 outputs and outcomes met fewer than half of all stated objectives adequately.

(b)'No conclusion' means that documentary evidence was insufficient or inadequate to draw a conclusion.

Attachment A Terms of reference

Objective An assessment of ACIAR-funded Special/Restricted grants projects

1. Assess the extent to which project outputs and outcomes meet project objectives, as reflected in project documentation (design documents, interim and termination reports). In assessment take into account
   – Procedures by which ACIAR receives, helps develop, screens and prioritises projects before approval for funding;
   – Developments in the statements of guidelines for Special Purpose/Restricted Grants, and for annual and termination reporting since the introduction of these special types of projects; and
   – The fact that termination reports are written by project proponents and are not the outcomes of independent reviews, and that IARCs have procedures for the assessment of project outcomes.

2. According to the evidence therein, assess the extent to which the reports address the five guidelines for preparations of IARC projects, namely:
   – To further Australia's development assistance objectives through international research in the agricultural and natural resource sectors (as specified by the four outcomes and associated indicators in ACIAR's corporate plan 1997
   – To add value to, and interact with, ACIAR's bilateral program;
   – To provide a mechanism for involving advanced Australian research institutions in global programs in ways that bilateral programs cannot do;
   – To yield potential benefit to Australian agriculture and natural resource management; and
   – To strengthen effective linkages to NARS in ACIAR's target region or fields of research.

3. In the light of these assessments of previous projects, draw out any conclusions about the adequacy of ACIAR's new funding and reporting guidelines for the use of IARC teams.