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**Australian Centre for
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A programmatic evaluation of the TADEP and ASLP programs



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ACIAR OUTCOME
EVALUATION SERIES

A programmatic evaluation of the TADEP and ASLP programs

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Alinea-Whitelum



2023

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) was established in June 1982 by an Act of the Australian Parliament. ACIAR operates as part of Australia's international development assistance program, with a mission to achieve more productive and sustainable agricultural systems, for the benefit of developing countries and Australia. It commissions collaborative research between Australian and developing-country researchers in areas where Australia has special research competence. It also administers Australia's contribution to the International Agricultural Research Centres.

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Foreword

This book is the third in series of reports based on outcome evaluations of research and programs supported by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR). It presents a synthesis of the programmatic learnings from both the Agriculture Sector Linkages Program (ASLP), which was evaluated in ACIAR Outcome Evaluation OE001, and the Transformative Agriculture and Enterprise Development Program (TADEP) which was evaluated in ACIAR Outcome Evaluation OE002.

ACIAR establishes international research partnerships between scientists from Australia and partner countries in the Indo-Pacific region to improve the productivity and sustainability of agriculture, fisheries and forestry for smallholder farmers. An important mechanism for achieving our aims is to work closely with the wider Australian aid program to transition promising research into improved agricultural practices and profitable enterprises at scale. Both TADEP and ASLP were co-funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and ACIAR.

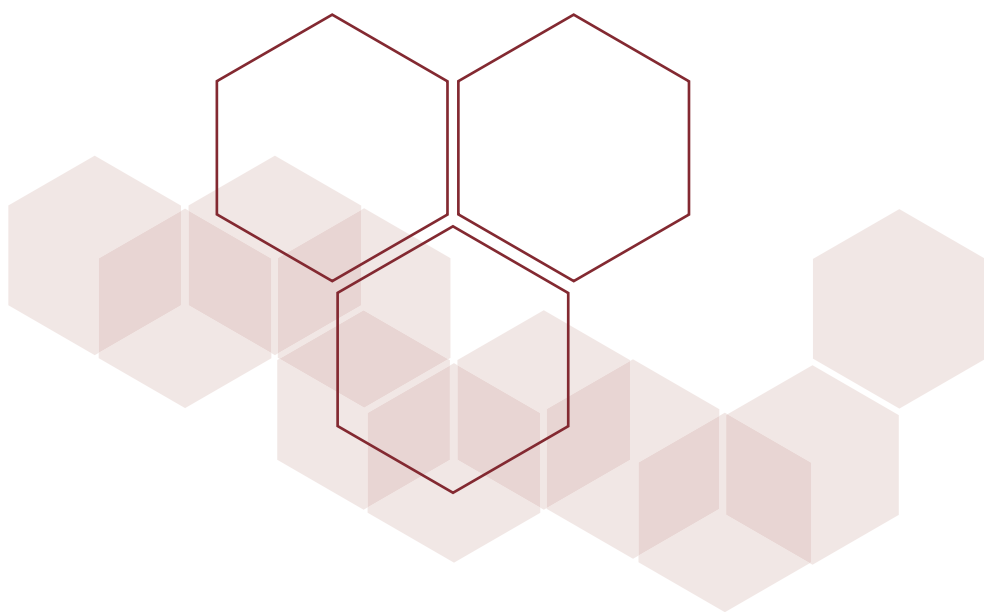
As a learning organisation, ACIAR is committed to understanding the diverse outcomes delivered by the research collaborations we develop, to demonstrate the value of investment of public funds, to continuously improve research design and to improve the capacity of our research to improve the lives of farming communities in our partner countries.

Outcome evaluations adopt a largely qualitative, theory-based approach and seek to empirically test the project's articulated logic and investigate the assumptions underpinning this logic. In addition to documenting the contribution of ACIAR projects to intended outcomes, these outcome evaluations are intended to generate data for cross-case analysis that, over time, will support the development of lessons regarding effective agriculture research-for-development practice.

This combined evaluation seeks to understand the value that the programmatic approach of ASLP and TADEP delivered in each case, and what common lessons can be identified to inform future programmatic and/or place-based research-for-development investments.



Andrew Campbell
Chief Executive Officer, ACIAR



Abbreviations and acronyms

ACIAR	Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research
ASLP	Agriculture Sector Linkages Program (Pakistan)
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australia)
FFT	Family Farm Teams (TADEP)
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
PNG	Papua New Guinea
SDIP	Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio
TADEP	Transformative Agriculture and Enterprise Development Program (PNG)

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Summary

This report synthesises findings from evaluations of 2 ACIAR programs – the Transformative Agriculture and Enterprise Development Program (TADEP) and the Agriculture Sector Linkages Program (ASLP) – to identify lessons that can inform future ACIAR programs. It also draws on a light-touch review of the ACIAR Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP).

The ASLP and TADEP evaluations, as well as this synthesis, have their basis in a framework outlining the potential benefits of a programmatic approach (see Appendix 1). That framework identifies 4 potential benefits of working within a program: increasing impact; increasing knowledge and learning; increasing influence and adoption; and streamlining management.

It is clear that TADEP, ASLP and SDIP have achieved a number of those benefits. *The programs were particularly strong in increasing knowledge and learning*, which was achieved through mechanisms such as annual meetings, cross-project dialogue and field visits. This enabled good learning and collaboration between the projects.

The realisation of program benefits in the other 3 areas was more mixed. For example, ASLP and SDIP were better able to achieve *increased impact*, as those programs were designed to work to an overall program framework. In TADEP, the design process restricted the extent to which this benefit was realised, as the projects were designed before the program framework was fully developed. On *increasing influence and adoption*, TADEP had a strong website and communication approach but gave limited attention to influencing in-country partners. ASLP, on the other hand, formed a high-level steering committee to link to Pakistan policymakers but did not have systems to ensure that program outputs were widely accessible. All programs sought to *streamline management* but experienced some challenges, particularly in working with the program funder and in developing high-quality but efficient monitoring, evaluation and reporting systems.

Based on the different experiences of ASLP, TADEP and SDIP, 2 overarching lessons for future ACIAR programs have been identified:

- a. **Be intentional:** For future programs, ACIAR should explicitly identify the specific benefits it wants to achieve through a programmatic approach. It should then intentionally design and implement activities, and monitor and evaluate processes and outcomes, to ensure that those programmatic benefits are realised.
- b. **Resource appropriately:** ACIAR should ensure that programmatic approaches are properly resourced. Program resources should be proportionate to the programmatic benefits that ACIAR wants to achieve.

To help ACIAR operationalise Lesson A, examples of good practice – and, in some cases, examples of what not to do – have been identified for each of the potential benefits of a programmatic approach.

For ACIAR programs that wish to *increase impact*, ACIAR should implement the following lessons:

- **Lesson 1:** Develop a program-level theory of change and adaptive management mechanisms: A program-level theory of change should be developed as the first step for a program. It should articulate desired outcomes, unpack the individual activities required to achieve the outcomes, and identify limitations. Ideally, the framework should be complemented by adaptive management mechanisms – for example, small research activities, or flexibility to adopt new approaches in response to challenges – to ensure that programs can adapt to changing circumstances.
- **Lesson 2:** Maximise the use of diverse perspectives: Diverse perspectives can be used to develop holistic solutions to the challenges being faced in-country, help manage the risk of projects working in silos, and enable gender and social inclusion to be better integrated into projects. ACIAR can maximise the use of diverse perspectives by considering project timing and deliberately sequencing mutually reinforcing projects; ensuring that incentives exist for individual projects to draw on each other's perspectives; and ensuring that team selection considers traits such as openness to collaboration and willingness to work in an interdisciplinary way.



For programs with a focus on *increasing knowledge and learning*, the following lesson may be relevant:

- **Lesson 3:** Support knowledge-sharing and learning: A program can provide opportunities for learning that would not be available to individual projects. Specific learning mechanisms include annual meetings (including informal networking) that allow trusting relationships to develop; identifying areas where projects can work together for mutual benefit; and providing resources for that work (for example, collaborative research grants). For the future, ACIAR should consider how it can better support learning between different programs and how it can support online knowledge-sharing and learning in a 'COVID-19-normal' world.

When *increasing influence and adoption* is a high priority, ACIAR should consider the following:

- **Lesson 4:** Communicate research and achievements for increased influence: Programs can achieve greater visibility and recognition compared to individual projects. To ensure that this translates into influence, programs should have well-developed communication strategies that focus on influencing in-country stakeholders to adopt research outputs and a central repository for program outputs (such as manuals and training materials) to ensure that they are accessible beyond the life of the program.
- **Lesson 5:** Build key relationships to influence policy: Deliberately cultivating key relationships can ensure that a program's influence is increased. This can be achieved by hiring and drawing on networks of strong in-country staff; forming high-level steering committees as bodies to share program results and increase influence; and having dedicated policy-focused projects to link technical research outputs with relevant policy challenges.

For programs that want to *streamline management*, the following lessons may be instructive:

- **Lesson 6:** Invest in relationships with external funders (when relevant): When a program is funded by an external party, a programmatic approach can enable coordinated interactions with that funder. In that circumstance, it is vital to build a strong partnership and to understand and meet the funder's needs. ACIAR should focus on early investment in partnership-building and on ongoing investment to maintain relationships and build a shared understanding of a program's benefits.
- **Lesson 7:** Establish shared governance arrangements: Shared governance arrangements can reduce management burden. As noted under Lesson 5, a high-level steering committee can be an effective mechanism for achieving influence with in-country stakeholders. A separate internal coordination mechanism – focusing on operational matters – can also be an effective way of streamlining management and communication within programs. A program can also reduce management burden by streamlining partner-government approval processes.
- **Lesson 8:** Invest in monitoring and evaluation frameworks that focus on outcomes: ACIAR programs would benefit from monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks that are based on a theory of change, collect data on outcomes and streamline systems so that project teams are capturing one set of data that meets both project and program reporting requirements. This would ensure that ACIAR understands overall program performance, can adjust program approaches as needed and can report externally on program achievements.

As noted above under overarching Lesson B, *ACIAR should ensure that programmatic approaches are properly resourced*. Dedicated program-level resourcing is critical to realise the potential benefits of the programmatic approach. Resources for program collaboration also need to be factored in at the project level. The appropriate resourcing profile will depend on the type of benefits that ACIAR aims to achieve. While program-related transaction costs can be significant, they can be far outweighed by the programmatic benefits that they deliver.





Introduction

Overview

This report synthesises findings from evaluations of 2 ACIAR programs – the Transformative Agriculture and Enterprise Development Program (TADEP) and the Agriculture Sector Linkages Program (ASLP) – to identify a set of lessons that can inform future ACIAR programs.

The primary audience for this synthesis report is ACIAR program staff with direct responsibilities for programs, including the ACIAR Executive and senior managers.

Scope and methodology

This synthesis report is the culmination of a larger ACIAR programmatic evaluation that has been completed in 3 phases. Phase I included individual evaluations of several component projects within ASLP and TADEP. Phase II involved program-level evaluations of ASLP and TADEP, drawing on the project-level evaluations and identifying the benefits and challenges of implementing the programmatic approach in each instance. This synthesis report represents Phase III of the evaluation, synthesising findings from both program-level evaluations and identifying key lessons for ACIAR in using the programmatic approach.

The 2 program-level evaluations, as well as this synthesis report, have their basis in a framework outlining the potential benefits of a programmatic approach (see Appendix 1). The framework was developed drawing on literature, particularly Buffardi and Hearn (2015), as well as the evaluation team's expertise. For this synthesis report, the framework:

- outlines the potential benefits of a programmatic approach under 4 topic areas: increasing impact; knowledge and learning; influence and adoption; and streamlining management
- provides a common framework to synthesise and compare lessons across TADEP and ASLP.

The lessons from TADEP and ASLP have also been supplemented by a light-touch review of the ACIAR Sustainable Development Investment Portfolio (SDIP), with a particular focus on its second phase.

More information on the methodology used for this synthesis is in Appendix 2.

Introduction to the programs assessed

Within its bilateral research program, ACIAR predominantly works through a project modality in which individual projects are overseen directly by a thematic research program manager. There are 3 large programmatic investments currently managed by ACIAR: ASLP,¹ TADEP and SDIP. Each of these programs includes:

- a cluster of projects drawn from different research disciplines delivered within a common geography
- a dedicated program manager
- an intention to deliver to common outcome areas, and
- an intention for cross-learning between projects.

TADEP is a multidisciplinary research program that aims to improve the livelihoods of rural men and women in Papua New Guinea through five component research projects. TADEP is co-funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and ACIAR. The program commenced in 2015 and concluded in December 2021.

ASLP was a research-for-development program in the Punjab and Sindh provinces of Pakistan that focused on enhancing selected agricultural value chains for the ultimate benefit of the rural poor. The program had 2 phases: Phase I ran from 2005 to 2010, and Phase II was implemented from 2011 to 2015. The program was funded by DFAT.²

A list of individual projects under TADEP and ASLP is in Appendix 4.

SDIP aims to improve food, energy and water security for sustainable food systems in India, Bangladesh and Nepal. Its first 2 phases up to 2021 were funded by DFAT, and a third phase is to be funded by ACIAR.

1 The current phase of the Pakistan program is known as Aik Saath or the Agriculture Value Chain Collaborative Research Program (AVCCR). However, the projects evaluated all started under the earlier phase, known as ASLP. For simplicity, this program is referred to as 'ASLP' in this document.

2 ASLP was originally funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). AusAID was merged with DFAT in 2013. For ease and clarity, the ASLP funder is referred to as 'DFAT' throughout this document.

Potential benefits of a programmatic approach

As noted above, the evaluation team has developed a framework that identifies the potential benefits of a programmatic approach beyond the benefits of funding individual projects. The framework is provided in Appendix 1. The potential benefits of a programmatic approach can be summarised as:

- *increasing impact* through broadening the diversity of perspectives and strategies to provide a holistic response to a shared problem; working collaboratively and combining results towards a program theory of change; and, in some circumstances, extending the geographical reach of interventions
- *increasing knowledge and learning* by sharing information between projects and comparing intervention approaches in different contexts
- *increasing influence and adoption* through joint action with government, market institutions or other stakeholders; building relationships that foster sustainability; and strengthening communication of research findings
- *streamlining management* by coordinating implementing entities and interactions with funders; through shared governance arrangements; and by standardising management and specialised support (M&E and reporting processes, approach to cross-cutting issues, capacity development support, and so on).





Findings and lessons

Key findings

The first area that the evaluation examined was the rationale and motivations that underpinned decisions by ACIAR to adopt a programmatic approach in the programs examined. *The rationale and motivations were somewhat different in each of the 3 programs assessed; however, there were also a number of commonalities.*

Looking at the programmatic framework used for this evaluation, the motivations of ACIAR to date have primarily focused on 3 of the 4 main potential benefits:

- **Sharing and learning:** In all 3 programs, ACIAR saw potential for a programmatic approach to add value by creating opportunities for sharing and learning across projects within the same geographical area. This took 2 main forms: sharing of research findings and approaches between similar commodity-focused projects; and the addition of social and/or policy-focused projects intended to make broader connections within and outside the program.
- **Influence and adoption:** Both ASLP and SDIP included new projects in their second phases aimed at identifying policy constraints and using the evidence generated by farm-level research to inform the development of policy options. In SDIP, a key motivation for the programmatic approach was that it would more effectively engage senior government officials. This aspect of policy engagement was not as apparent in TADEP.
- **Streamlining management:** A further motivation for adding a program overlay was to streamline M&E, reporting and capacity development. This was articulated most clearly in the TADEP evaluation but was also evident in ASLP's second phase.

While increasing impact was less widely recognised as a key driving factor in deciding to adopt the programmatic approach, the recognition that complex development problems need to be addressed through more holistic solutions is expressed in documentation for both TADEP and SDIP. Another influencing factor was the preference from DFAT for a programmatic approach (a factor for both ASLP and SDIP).

ACIAR has been able to realise a range of benefits through the use of the programmatic approach. Table 1 includes a summary of the experiences of ASLP and TADEP in relation to program benefits (a similar summary was not prepared for SDIP, given the light-touch nature of the review of that program). *Overall, it appears that the benefit most strongly and consistently realised is sharing and learning between projects.* This featured strongly in all 3 programs and was achieved through annual meetings, cross-project dialogues and field visits.

Other benefits were realised to differing degrees in different programs. *Increasing impact was more strongly realised for ASLP and SDIP.* The projects in those programs were designed to be complementary and work collaboratively towards an overarching program framework. For ASLP, that enabled the achievement of some results beyond those that could have been achieved by individual projects. For SDIP, the evaluation has not been able to assess program outcomes, but the approach appears likely to have maximised outcomes. In TADEP, the design process restricted the extent to which this benefit was realised, as the projects were designed individually before the program framework was fully developed.

Table 1 Summary of ASLP and TADEP programmatic benefits

Potential benefit of programmatic approach	ASLP	TADEP
1: Increasing impact	Projects were closely connected but without a strong theory of change; projects operated independently with some collaboration	Projects have similar goals but do not align with a theory of change or strongly complement each other
2: Increasing knowledge and learning	Strong evidence of sharing and learning between projects and evidence of how that learning has strengthened project implementation	Strong evidence of sharing and learning between most projects
3: Increasing influence and adoption	Some examples or evidence of the program enhancing leverage or influence with stakeholders and communicating results	Some evidence of the program structure being used to promote the program or influence stakeholders
4: Streamlining management	Minimal benefits to streamlining reporting and donor relationships; governance and training adding value to the projects	Streamlined reporting and communications with funders; M&E and cross-cutting issues could be improved

ASLP and TADEP were strong at different components of increasing influence and adoption. ASLP was stronger on policy influence and engagement with in-country stakeholders but less successful at communicating results. TADEP had a strong focus on communications and a central website to enable the dissemination of information but gave limited attention to influencing in-country stakeholders. SDIP appeared to perform well in both these areas, achieving good influence through a high-level steering committee and effectively communicating research findings.

All programs sought to achieve benefits through streamlining management functions; however, this appears to have been most effectively realised by SDIP. Again, ASLP and TADEP realised some benefits in relation to streamlining interactions with DFAT and programmatic M&E and reporting. ASLP was also able to streamline in-country partner engagement through a high-level steering committee, as well as by obtaining partner-government approval for the whole program (making individual project approvals much easier). Both these programs had part-time program coordinators. SDIP resourced program management to a much greater extent, using 2 full-time program staff and support from 2 research program managers. That arrangement was very highly regarded and seen as critical to the success of the program.

Overall, very few disadvantages of taking the programmatic approach were identified. In TADEP, there were some challenges with regard to the administrative burden of reporting, as project teams were required to prepare separate project-level and program-level reports. In addition, project teams found it challenging to incorporate program-level activities into their existing plans, as they had not budgeted time or resources for that work. For both ASLP and SDIP, the programmatic approach came with transaction costs. For example, additional staff time – in the form of program coordinators – was needed to oversee the programs, while busy ACIAR research program managers and project leaders needed to put more time and effort into collaboration and coordination. However, measured against the benefits that the programmatic approach provided, those transaction costs appear to be a worthwhile investment.

Overarching lessons

Based on the findings outlined above, the evaluation team has identified a number of lessons for ACIAR to consider when designing, implementing and reporting on its programs.

Overall, 2 overarching lessons have been identified:

- a. **Be intentional:** For future programs, ACIAR should explicitly identify the specific benefits it wants to achieve through a programmatic approach. It should then intentionally design and implement activities, and monitor and evaluation systems and processes, to ensure that those programmatic benefits are realised.
- b. **Resource appropriately:** ACIAR should ensure that programmatic approaches are properly resourced. Dedicated program-level staff and resources are critical to realising the potential benefits of a programmatic approach. Resources allocated to programs should be proportionate to the programmatic benefits that ACIAR wants to achieve.

To help ACIAR operationalise these lessons, the following sections of this report:

- Describe the potential benefits of a programmatic approach.
This will allow ACIAR to understand these potential benefits and intentionally select the benefits it would like to achieve for specific programs.
- Provide good practice lessons – and in some cases, examples of what not to do – for each of the potential benefits of a programmatic approach.
These lessons are drawn from the evaluations of ASLP and TADEP and the light-touch review of SDIP. The examples can be used as a guide by ACIAR staff to inform the design, implementation and reporting of programs.



Realising the potential benefits of a programmatic approach

To assist ACIAR to better understand how it might realise the potential benefits of a programmatic approach, the evaluation team has identified some good practice examples – and, in some cases, some examples of what not to do – drawing on the experiences of ASLP, TADEP and SDIP. These examples provide ACIAR with guidance and practical ideas on how programmatic benefits can be achieved in future programs.

Increasing impact

Lesson 1: Develop a program-level theory of change and adaptive management mechanisms

To maximise potential impacts, *an overall program framework should be developed first, ideally using a theory-of-change approach* to articulate desired outcomes, unpack what individual activities are required to contribute towards those outcomes, and identify limitations. The program-level theory of change should then set the parameters for the design of a set of complementary projects (and potentially other activities) that link clearly to program objectives.

A clear theory of change can support strong program management and help to promote shared understanding and realistic expectations among funders, internal ACIAR review processes and in-country partners. Ideally, a theory of change should be developed through a workshop that involves those key stakeholders, along with key implementers, such as intended project leads.

The different experiences of ASLP, TADEP and SDIP illustrate the importance of developing a program framework as the starting point for a program. ASLP was envisioned and designed as a program from its inception; initial program parameters were developed during the first scoping visit to Pakistan in 2005, and specific projects to be implemented under the program were then developed. While ASLP did not have an articulated program-level theory of change, its constituent projects complemented each other because of the early development of a program framework and aimed to work together to achieve overarching outcomes. SDIP also had a clear logic, in which different projects aimed to complement each other and work together towards an overarching set of outcomes. That enabled strong collaboration within the program.

By contrast, although TADEP was conceptualised as a program, time pressure to commence implementation meant that initial attention was focused on designing the constituent projects rather than the program framework. As a result, TADEP's 5 individual research projects were not mutually reinforcing and were implemented largely independently of each other, creating challenges in achieving program-wide outcomes. The projects within TADEP were similar enough to enable the development of overarching program objectives. Overall, however, the design process for TADEP – while necessary, given the specific time and political pressures that were being faced – meant that the opportunity to increase impact through a programmatic approach was diminished.

Ideally, a program-level theory of change *should be complemented by flexible and adaptive program management mechanisms.* This will assist programs to work towards their theory of change by enabling them to adapt to changing circumstances or by allowing them to address theory-of-change gaps that emerge during implementation. SDIP achieved that very effectively through the use of small research activities. The program was able to commission those research projects, valued at up to \$250,000, to address priority issues related to their program framework that emerged during the program. TADEP also adapted during implementation. For example, challenges were raised at annual meetings, and the program had flexibility to implement new approaches to address those challenges. One example was collaborative research grants, which were introduced in response to the need to encourage collaboration between different projects. The TADEP evaluation notes that those grants could have been even more effective if they had been targeted at gaps in a TADEP theory of change.

Lesson 2: Maximise the use of diverse perspectives

One of the benefits of a programmatic approach is that it can *bring together diverse perspectives to create holistic responses to the challenges that a program is seeking to address*. It is important for ACIAR to consider how to maximise the diversity of perspectives for a number of reasons. First, even with a clear articulation of a broad program-level theory of change, relying on projects as the primary implementation modality still carries the risk that each will operate in its own silo. Second, project leads are often academic researchers whose incentives revolve around the publication of research findings. Without program-level incentives, they might not factor in the time or ‘headspace’ required for collaborative activities. In addition, the evaluations of ASLP and TADEP, and the projects under them, highlighted weaknesses in the consideration and integration of gender equality and social inclusion into project and program work. Improved approaches that draw on diverse perspectives can assist ACIAR to address those weaknesses.

TADEP, ASLP and SDIP provide a number of lessons on making the most of diverse perspectives:

- **Timing:** It is important to ensure that program timing supports the use of diverse perspectives. For ASLP, the program introduced diverse perspectives through the social sciences project, which began in Phase II of the program. However, this project struggled to work with the commodity-based projects, which had already established their sites and ways of working in Phase I. In contrast, TADEP included its social sciences project – Family Farm Teams (FFT) – from the start of the program. This, combined with TADEP’s collaborative approach (discussed below), enabled TADEP’s commodity-based projects to benefit from the FFT project’s approach.
- **Incentives:** Programs should also provide clear incentives for projects to work together and maximise diverse perspectives. In the case of ASLP, there were few incentives for projects to work in the interests of the program, rather than solely in the interests of the individual project. TADEP addressed this by introducing collaborative research grants, which functioned effectively to encourage diverse perspectives. Other approaches could include, for example, developing proposal and reporting systems to ensure that cross-project collaboration is planned, implemented and reported on; and ensuring that program coordinators have more power to compel projects to collaborate and work in the interests of the program in partnership with the responsible research program manager.

- **Team selection:** To capitalise on diverse perspectives and create holistic responses in programs, ACIAR should ensure that project teams include traits such as openness to collaboration and willingness to work in an interdisciplinary way. SDIP took that approach, deliberately working with more dynamic professionals and with institutions that were open to multidisciplinary work. Many of the TADEP project teams were also very interdisciplinary, combining agricultural science, social science and marketing. ACIAR should also ensure that its own program coordinators and research program managers are suited to the challenging role of managing complex programs.



Increasing knowledge and learning

Lesson 3: Support knowledge-sharing and learning

A program structure can generate significant additional benefits by providing mechanisms and opportunities for knowledge-sharing and learning that would otherwise not be available to individual projects.

ASLP and TADEP both demonstrated strong success in using their program structures to share knowledge and learning both within and outside their programs. The rapid review of SDIP suggests that this was also a key strength of Phase II. Many of the approaches used in these programs, such as annual meetings and regular program newsletters, would also be valuable in other programs.

Within TADEP, annual meetings were the main mechanism for structured sharing and learning and were highly regarded by all who attended. Alongside the formal meeting agenda, opportunities for informal networking and sharing were also seen as critical elements that made the meetings successful. A key benefit was that meaningful relationships could develop and mature over time, to enable the discussion of challenges from a position of trust.

Of particular benefit in TADEP was *the interaction between the Family Farm Teams project and the other projects*; many stakeholders described this project as the 'glue' that held TADEP together. The nature of FFT as a social science project meant that its approach and lessons were relevant across different commodity projects, and multiple project leaders indicated that their exposure to both the FFT approach and the project team had strongly influenced their approach to agricultural research. The interest in and take-up of the FFT model through collaborative research grants is an indication of the extent to which this concept was adopted by other projects.

The TADEP evaluation found that *sharing and learning can be further enhanced by building in additional informal mechanisms* to reach a wider audience than can attend international face-to-face meetings. This could include, for example, smaller and more frequent in-country meetings, virtual meetings, or discussion groups. Appropriate resourcing for those activities should be an integral part of a program framework.

ASLP also achieved knowledge-sharing and learning, which strengthened outcomes. This was driven by program mechanisms, such as annual meetings, and by having projects with strong shared interests. For example, the 2 mango projects were closely linked and had strong information exchange to strengthen outcomes. The policy enabling project also used issues identified in the commodity-based projects to guide its research on policy constraints. A further practical example is that the citrus and mango projects had mutual interests in improving nursery management in Pakistan and worked together to produce a best practice nursery management manual.

Note that many of the knowledge-sharing and learning approaches outlined above took place face to face. In a 'COVID-19-normal' world, many such approaches are likely to move online. Even post-COVID-19, it appears likely that travel – particularly international travel – will decrease significantly. *It would be beneficial for ACIAR to consider how it can continue its successful knowledge-sharing and learning approaches in this context.* One option may be for ACIAR to commission work that examines online alternatives that can provide the knowledge-sharing and learning benefits outlined above.

Other forms of learning noted during the evaluation include learning between different phases of the same program, and between different ACIAR programs. For example, *interviewees highlighted that ACIAR program coordinators from TADEP, SDIP and Aik Saath (ASLP Phase III) interact regularly to discuss issues and common hurdles.* However, some interviewees felt that such cross-phase or cross-program learning was informal and not well supported by ACIAR. For the future, ACIAR may wish to revisit its approach to cross-program learning, considering whether it is intentional, whether systems and leadership are in place to support it, and how to ensure that learning is broad-based across the organisation.

Increasing influence and adoption

Lesson 4: Communicate research and achievements for increased influence

Programs can achieve greater visibility and recognition compared to individual projects. Because of this, a potential benefit of a program is that *it can strengthen the communication of research findings in order to increase influence and adoption*. Key features of a strong communication approach include:

- a well-developed communications strategy that focuses on sharing outcomes and on influencing in-country stakeholders to adopt research outputs
- a central repository of program outputs to ensure that those outputs are accessible beyond the life of particular programs in order to maximise the opportunity for ongoing influence.

Ideally, these features should be designed as part of and managed by a program to ensure that they are closely integrated into the program's work and assist in the achievement of outcomes.

The TADEP, ASLP and SDIP experiences illustrate the importance of these features.

TADEP was able to harness resources for communications beyond what would typically be expected in a stand-alone research project. The program produced a range of communication materials to showcase program achievements; those materials were distributed widely to interested stakeholders and available on a dedicated website. However, TADEP's communications focused primarily on describing activities and individual success stories, rather than drawing broader implications for agricultural development in PNG. TADEP communications could have been strengthened further through the development of a more comprehensive communications strategy to ensure that products met the needs of key stakeholders.

SDIP had a strong approach to communications. For instance, it had a comprehensive website and was able to convene seminars and workshops. It was also able to synthesise project findings to produce helpful reports highlighting themes across projects.

ASLP missed an opportunity to increase its influence and adoption through the communication of research findings. The program's projects produced a significant number of research outputs, including practical materials such as best practice manuals, fact sheets and training modules. However, at the end of the program, there was no institutional home for many of those materials, nor a system to ensure their ongoing maintenance and availability. It was not until Phase III of the program that earlier outputs were collated onto an accessible web location – and even then only because of the initiative of a motivated individual.

Lesson 5: Build key relationships to influence policy

A related aspect of increasing influence is the *deliberate cultivation of key relationships, for instance among partner-government policymakers*. Mechanisms for achieving this can include formal steering committees, less formal networking and the inclusion of policy-focused projects or other activities within the program framework. Larger programs generally have greater 'brand recognition', credibility and potential scale of impact than individual projects and so are well placed to exert influence.

ASLP and SDIP both put considerable effort into building relationships with in-country partners, including partner governments. Both programs:

- hired and drew on networks of highly competent and well-regarded in-country staff
- had dedicated policy-focused projects, which helped link technical research outputs with relevant policy challenges and opportunities
- formed high-level steering committees as bodies to share program results and increase influence.

In the case of ASLP, the steering committee provided the program with a direct line of sight to senior policymakers in the Government of Pakistan. For SDIP, the steering committee was made up of eminent people representing the wider agricultural system across the 3 SDIP countries and was able to link the program to senior-level policymakers and other influential individuals and groups. Importantly, *both steering committees were advisory rather than decision-making bodies*, ensuring that they were effective forums for communication without acting as bureaucratic handbrakes on program decision-making.

In contrast, TADEP gave limited attention to leveraging influence with key stakeholders or addressing policy issues in PNG. It also lacked any governance mechanism that included key in-country stakeholders – a missed opportunity to build interest and buy-in.

Future programs would benefit from strategic, high-level governance arrangements that include representatives from external funders, partner governments and key partner organisations.



Streamlining management

Lesson 6: Invest in relationships with external funders (when relevant)

One of the benefits of a programmatic approach is that it can allow programs to coordinate interactions with external funders, when relevant. A program can, for example, coordinate relationship management, finances and reporting to a funder, reducing pressure on individual project teams to do so.

When there is an external funder, it is vital to build a strong partnership and understand and meet the funder's needs. The absence of a strong partnership creates a risk to a program's funding and long-term sustainability (noting that political imperatives or budget decisions that are beyond a funder's control may drive some of its decisions). Managing tensions with funders takes time and resources, which can detract from the potential benefits of management streamlining.

TADEP, ASLP and SDIP were all funded by DFAT, and all sought to coordinate interactions with that funder. All programs also experienced significant challenges in working with DFAT. In ASLP, for instance, mixed messages flowed through into the program's monitoring and evaluation and reporting – DFAT expressed dissatisfaction, while ACIAR felt that the expectations of DFAT were unrealistic and that its reporting needs were unclear. In a similar vein, those involved with SDIP noted that significant effort was put into meeting DFAT's M&E and reporting needs and aligning with the broader DFAT SDIP performance assessment framework, but feedback from DFAT was that its needs were not being met.

It is important to note that not all ACIAR programs will be funded by DFAT (or an external funder), meaning that this lesson will not be relevant to all programs. However, when programs are funded by external parties, ACIAR should focus on early investment in partnership building and ongoing investment in maintaining relationships and building a shared understanding of a program's benefits.

Lesson 7: Establish shared governance arrangements

A further benefit of a programmatic approach is that it can reduce management burden by establishing shared governance arrangements. As discussed above, a program steering committee can be a highly effective mechanism for fostering buy-in among key stakeholders and achieving broader influence. Both ASLP and SDIP found their steering committees also to be effective governance mechanisms, particularly given the committees' advisory mandates.

TADEP took a different approach to governance arrangements. TADEP introduced a program steering committee midway through implementation. The committee included project leaders, the program coordinator and key ACIAR staff, but did not involve any external stakeholders. Committee members found that the group was valuable in enhancing communication between the projects and in planning program-level events; note that the group focused more on operational concerns than on the strategic direction of the program.

The TADEP experience highlights the value of 2 separate mechanisms: a regular arrangement within the program to coordinate operations, as well as a more strategic, high-level governance arrangement with representation from key in-country partners.

Lesson 8: Invest in monitoring and evaluation frameworks that focus on outcomes

A programmatic approach can be beneficial if it enables the standardisation of management and specialised support. In particular, a program should develop an overarching M&E framework and report against that framework. Ideally, the framework would be based on a theory of change (as discussed under Lesson 1). It should bring together project-level data, tell a story about the overall performance of the program and be used to report to external funders (if applicable).

ASLP and TADEP both had program-level M&E frameworks. However, both programs also experienced significant challenges in implementing them:

- TADEP struggled to map project-level achievements against its M&E framework, which affected its effectiveness. This reflected the way the program and projects were initially designed, which meant that it was always going to be challenging to tell a coherent program story.
- The TADEP program-level M&E framework was not complemented by M&E frameworks at the project level, meaning that project teams were collecting different data to meet different project-level and program-level M&E needs.
- Most ASLP projects collected only M&E data on outputs. That made it difficult to assess whether both the projects and the program overall achieved higher level outcomes in areas such as capacity building and the adoption of new agricultural practices.

For the future, ACIAR programs would benefit from M&E frameworks that are based on a program theory of change, collect data on outcomes, and streamline systems so that project teams are capturing one set of data that meets both project and program reporting requirements.

Revisiting the overarching lessons

As outlined above, this synthesis has identified 2 overarching lessons. The first is that ACIAR should explicitly identify the benefits that it wants to achieve and then intentionally design and implement activities to realise those benefits. This report has provided a number of lessons from ASLP, TADEP and SDIP to assist ACIAR to do that.

The second overarching lesson is that *ACIAR should ensure that programmatic approaches are properly resourced*. A programmatic approach does come with transaction costs. Dedicated program-level resourcing is critical to realise the potential benefits of the approach. Additional staff time is needed to oversee a program, and busy ACIAR research program managers and project leaders will need to put time and effort into collaboration and coordination.

The particular resourcing profile needs to be commensurate with the type of benefits that ACIAR aims to achieve. At a minimum, there should be a program coordinator to manage program-level initiatives, M&E and reporting.

Both ASLP and TADEP had *part-time program coordinators, who were widely viewed as central to achieving program benefits*. For TADEP, the coordinator's ability to bring stakeholders together, build momentum in shared initiatives and encourage collaboration was particularly critical.

SDIP featured particularly strong resourcing of program-level coordination, including a dedicated program component that included a program coordinator, a program manager and support from 2 ACIAR research program managers. Funds were also available to contract in specialist expertise when needed. While these program-level costs were significant, the benefits realised by funding these roles more than justified the expense.

Resources for program collaboration also need to be factored in at the project level. Designing a program first (as discussed above) allows projects to factor in the resources required for attendance at program learning events, collaboration with other projects, and support for the program's M&E and reporting requirements.

Finally, ACIAR should consider how to *streamline the resources required to implement programs*. Strategies could include the following:

- Clearly define roles and responsibilities between research program managers, in-country ACIAR staff and dedicated program staff, and clearly communicate them to all parties, particularly project leaders. This will reduce uncertainty about who is responsible for various tasks and further enhance the effectiveness of all roles related to program management.
- Streamline M&E and reporting; for example, by ensuring that projects collect and report on one set of data that meets both project and program requirements.
- Consider more local-level and/or remote collaboration opportunities to facilitate the cost-effective inclusion of in-country staff and partners in learning activities.



Conclusions

A programmatic approach can provide many benefits beyond those that individual projects can deliver. Potential programmatic benefits including increasing impact; increasing knowledge and learning; increasing influence and adoption; and streamlining management.

The ACIAR programs examined in this synthesis – ASLP, TADEP and SDIP – have all realised at least some of those benefits. In particular, these programs have been strong in increasing knowledge and learning between projects, which was achieved through mechanisms such as annual meetings, cross-project dialogue and field visits. The extent to which other programmatic benefits have been achieved varied across the programs.

For the future, ACIAR programs could benefit by implementing 2 overarching lessons:

- Explicitly identify the specific benefits that a program should achieve through a programmatic approach, and then intentionally design and implement the program to ensure that those benefits are realised.
- Ensure that the programmatic approach is properly resourced in a manner that is proportionate to the programmatic benefits ACIAR wants to achieve.

To help operationalise these overarching lessons, *good practice lessons – and in some cases, examples of what not to do – have been identified* from ASLP, TADEP and SDIP:

- Programs that seek to increase impact should develop a program-level theory of change and adaptive management mechanisms and maximise the use of diverse perspectives.
- Programs that wish to increase knowledge and learning should support knowledge-sharing and learning, particularly through formal and informal mechanisms that build trusting relationships between project teams.
- Programs that prioritise influence and adoption should communicate research and achievements and build key relationships to influence policy.
- Programs that aim to streamline management should invest in relationships with external funders (when relevant), establish shared governance arrangements, and invest in M&E frameworks that focus on outcomes.

Overall, substantial benefits were realised through the programmatic approaches used in ASLP, TADEP and SDIP, and there were very few clear disadvantages in taking those approaches. Given the potential for even greater benefits to be achieved, the associated costs of a programmatic approach appear to be a worthwhile investment.

Learning from and applying the lessons identified in this synthesis would help to ensure that the experience of these 3 programs was worthwhile not only for the practical outputs they achieved, but for the foundation they provided for future ACIAR programs.

References

Buffardi AL and Hearn S (2015) *Multi-project programmes: functions, forms and implications for evaluation and learning*, Overseas Development Institute Methods Lab, London.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2017) *DFAT Monitoring and Evaluation Standards*, DFAT, Canberra.



Appendices

Appendix 1: Framework of programmatic benefits

Dimension	Extent to which benefits were realised by individual programs			
	Potential programmatic benefits	Low	Medium	High
Increasing impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projects work collaboratively towards a program theory of change, combining results for greater impact. Extending the reach of interventions to multiple geographical areas. Broadening the diversity of perspectives and strategies to provide a holistic response to a shared problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projects are loosely related to program goals/objectives but operate independently. No program-level theory of change. Geographical locations of projects are not strategic. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projects are closely connected to program goals/objectives but without a strong theory of change. Projects operate largely independently but collaborate on some activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projects are highly interdependent and complementary. A combination of project outcomes is needed to meet program goals. A strong overarching theory of change drives project selection. Projects may address different aspects of a common problem or operate in different locations to strategically broaden outcomes.
Increasing knowledge and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sharing information between projects to build knowledge and strengthen outcomes. Comparing intervention approaches in different contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No or limited evidence of sharing and learning between projects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some evidence of sharing and learning between projects. Examples in which learning has influenced project implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong evidence of sharing and learning between projects and clear evidence of how that learning has strengthened project implementation.
Increasing influence and adoption	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing leverage through joint action with government, market institutions or other stakeholders. Fostering sustainability by building relationships. Strengthening the communication of research findings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No or limited evidence that the program structure is being used to promote the program or to influence stakeholders. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some evidence of the program enhancing leverage or influence with stakeholders and communicating results (beyond what could have been achieved by individual projects). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program routinely works to influence stakeholders, to raise awareness of program outcomes, and to increase the adoption and sustainability of results. There is evidence that this has had a positive effect.
Streamlining management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coordinating implementing entities and interactions with funders. Shared governance arrangements. Standardising management and specialised support (M&E and reporting processes, approach to cross-cutting issues, capacity development support). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No or minimal benefits in relation to streamlining reporting or communication with funders and other stakeholders. No or minimal support for M&E, cross-cutting issues or capacity development. Governance provides oversight of projects, but without significant value-add to the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some benefits in relation to streamlining communication with funders and reporting. Shared M&E framework. Some shared capacity building among projects. Governance provides oversight of projects, with some value-add to the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear benefits achieved by streamlining communication and reporting. Shared M&E framework effectively used to aggregate program results. Program structure strengthens project approaches to cross-cutting themes and builds capacity on common issues. Governance contributes strongly to the achievement of program-level outcomes.

Source: Adapted from Buffardi and Hearn (2015)

Appendix 2: Synthesis methodology

Data collection and analysis

This synthesis report was guided by the following key evaluation questions:

1. What rationale and motivations have underpinned decisions by ACIAR to adopt a programmatic approach in the 2 instances assessed?
2. What advantages and disadvantages of the programmatic approach are evident from those 2 programs? In what circumstances do potential benefits outweigh the challenges?
 - Overall, are there management and resourcing efficiencies or additional burdens?
 - Has the aggregation of projects into programs affected development impacts (actual or potential)?
 - What types of project grouping have proven most efficient and effective (for example, geographical, multidisciplinary, thematic)?
3. How applicable are the findings from the 2 programs to the experience of other ACIAR programs?
4. What other practical lessons for ACIAR managers can be drawn from the 2 programs evaluated?

The main data sources were the program-level evaluations prepared for TADEP and ASLP. Those data were supplemented by evidence on SDIP, which was collected through:

- reviews of key SDIP documentation, particularly program design and reporting documents
- online interviews with 4 program stakeholders selected by the evaluation team and ACIAR.

To analyse the TADEP, ASLP and SDIP data, the evaluation team developed a framework outlining the potential benefits of a programmatic approach (see Appendix 1). The framework was developed drawing on literature, particularly Buffardi and Hearn (2015), as well as the evaluation team's expertise. This framework:

- outlines the potential benefits of a programmatic approach under 4 topic areas: increasing impact; knowledge and learning; influence and adoption; and streamlining management
- provides a common framework to synthesise and compare lessons from TADEP and ASLP.

Preliminary findings from the synthesis report were shared and tested in a validation workshop with key ACIAR stakeholders. That provided the opportunity to 'ground-truth' the assessments, identify any key issues not addressed, clarify any areas of uncertainty and correct any misinterpretations. A draft evaluation report was reviewed by ACIAR and finalised in accordance with feedback received.

Limitations

This has been a complex and multilayered evaluation encompassing 2 major programs and their constituent projects across 2 countries and differing time periods, plus an additional light-touch review of a third program. It was conducted by an Australia-based evaluation team, entirely as a home-based exercise and within a set time frame and budget. Specific limitations for this synthesis report include the following:

- This synthesis report draws heavily on the 2 program-level evaluations of TADEP and ASLP, which in turn derive from project-level evaluations of several constituent projects within each program. Each of the project and program evaluations had specific limitations, as outlined in their respective reports. In addition, not all projects within each program could be evaluated in detail and reflected in this synthesis.
- SDIP was included only at the synthesis stage of the exercise. The evaluation team relied heavily on pre-existing documentation provided by ACIAR, and those documents were of varying quality. Given the time limitations, no stakeholders outside ACIAR were interviewed in relation to SDIP. Consequently, the evidence on SDIP is less rich and robust than findings related to TADEP and ASLP.

Ethical considerations

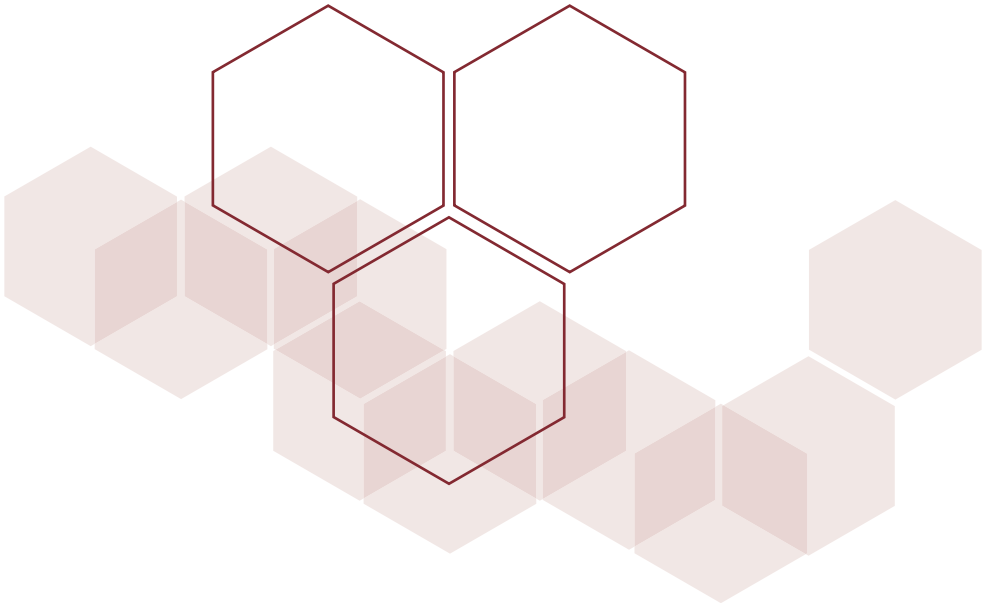
The evaluation was conducted in accordance with the *DFAT monitoring and evaluation standards* (DFAT, 2017). This included giving appropriate consideration to the following matters:

- *Informed consent*: Before consultations, all participants were provided with a verbal overview of why they were being consulted and how the information would be used and were informed that their participation was voluntary. Consultations were undertaken only after verbal consent was obtained.
- *Privacy and confidentiality*: The identities of stakeholders involved in the evaluation have been protected. Key informants in professional roles may be referred to by their position title in the report where explicit consent has been obtained; otherwise, they are referred to as representatives of the organisations they work with.



Appendix 3: Stakeholders consulted on SDIP

Name	Title	Organisation or location
Robyn Johnston	Research Program Manager	ACIAR
Eric Huttner	Research Program Manager	ACIAR
Tamara Jackson	SDIP Program Manager	ACIAR
Kuhu Chatterjee	SDIP Program Coordinator	ACIAR



Appendix 4: Projects under TADEP and ASLP

Program / project	Project full name	Duration
TADEP		
1. PNG Cocoa	Enterprise-driven transformation of family cocoa production in East Sepik, Madang, New Ireland and Chimbu provinces of Papua New Guinea (HORT/2014/096)	March 2016 – February 2021
2. Bougainville Cocoa	Developing the cocoa value chain in Bougainville (HORT/2014/094)	February 2016 – December 2022
3. Galip Nut	Enhancing private sector-led development of the <i>Canarium</i> industry in Papua New Guinea (FST/2014/099)	June 2015 – December 2018
4. Sweetpotato	Supporting commercial sweetpotato production and marketing in the Papua New Guinea highlands (HORT/2014/097)	February 2016 – February 2021
5. Family Farm Teams	Improving opportunities for economic development for women smallholders in rural Papua New Guinea (ASEM/2014/095)	July 2015 – December 2018
ASLP		
1. Mango	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Mango production ASLP I (HORT/2005/153) b. Optimising mango supply chains for more profitable horticultural agri-enterprises in Pakistan and Australia (HORT/2005/157) c. Mango value chain improvement (HORT/2010/001) d. Integrated crop management practices to enhance value chain outcomes for the mango industry in Pakistan and Australia (HORT/2010/006) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) 2005–2010 (b) 2006–2010 (c) 2010–2015 (d) 2010–2014
2. Citrus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Citrus ASLP I (HORT/2005/160) b. The enhancement of citrus value chains' production in Pakistan and Australia through improved orchard management practices (HORT/2010/002) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) 2007–2010 (b) 2011–2015
3. Livestock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Improving dairy production in Pakistan through improved extension services (LPS/2005/132) b. Strengthening dairy value chains in Pakistan through improved farm management and more effective extension services (LPS/2010/007) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) 2007–2011 (b) 2011–2015

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