LESSONS SOUGHT FROM MEASURING INVESTMENT

ACIAR is ensuring transparency in its investments by evaluating the impact of the research it supports.

BY KELLIE PENFOLD

For 50 years the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has been developing rice varieties for release in Asian countries. Now ACIAR is undertaking a study to measure the impact of IRRI’s contribution to rice productivity in the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia.

Although the primary aim of the study is to quantify the economic benefits of germplasm improvement, identifying lessons to further improve the delivery and outcomes of research and agricultural development will be a valuable output of the work.

Dr Debbie Templeton, manager of ACIAR’s impact assessment program, says the study will collate available release and adoption data on IRRI’s major rice varieties, and then (where data and resources allow) measure production gains in rice-growing regions of the Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia.

While assessing the impact of agricultural R&D activities is not easy, globally, stakeholders are demanding more transparency on the returns generated by their investments. ACIAR is no different.

IRRI is one of the many CGIAR centres that ACIAR partners and is the subject of one of the two CGIAR-based impact assessments currently being undertaken by ACIAR. The other is a meta-analysis of CGIAR centre impact assessments. A meta-analysis combines the results of several studies that address a set of related research hypotheses.

From 1995 to 2006 ACIAR’s impact assessment program commissioned a series of studies to assess the benefits to Australia of research undertaken by CGIAR centres.

These assessments provide evidence of uptake, adoption and impact, creating accountability on investment decisions.

In addition, while undertaking such studies lessons learnt are discussed to provide input into the selection, design and delivery of future R&D projects, Dr Templeton says. They are also useful for demonstrating the value of ACIAR’s role in Australia’s international development assistance program—an important function in a world demanding returns on investment.

ACIAR will continue to commission impact assessments of research undertaken by International Agricultural Research Centers (IARC). These assessments will cover the benefits to ACIAR’s mandate regions—Papua New Guinea and Pacific island countries, South-East Asia, South Asia, North Asia and Southern Africa. Dr Templeton says the purpose of these studies is to ensure all aspects of ACIAR’s investment portfolio are subjected to the same level of evaluation.

Due to ACIAR’s commitment to impact research, Dr Templeton was one of 16 impact assessment specialists invited to a Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) initiative to develop a project tracking the release and adoption of improved crop varieties and quantifying the impact of crop genetic improvement research in Africa and South Asia.

The BMGF project aims to: gather new baseline data on improved germplasm; examine existing methods for collecting data and develop new ones; encourage sustainable collection of data; develop ways to encourage the use of data on germplasm uptake and impact in current and future crop improvement research; and increase the knowledge of the impact of crop improvement on hunger, nutrition and gender.

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