Although primarily identified as an ‘aid agency’, ACIAR also plays a vital role on behalf of Australian agriculture as a provider of research funds and it is one of the few such providers in Australia with a truly international reach.

BY DR GIO BRAIDOTTI

ACIAR has a dual identity that allows it to occupy a unique position in Australia’s innovation system. The centre is part of Australia’s aid program but also functions as a provider of research funds that benefit Australian scientific capacity and agriculture.

As such, ACIAR increases the overall research base dealing with agricultural issues of interest to Australia.

This aspect of ACIAR’s character was noted by the Centre for International Economics (CIE) in its submission to the Productivity Commission Study on Public Support for Science and Innovation:

In particular, ACIAR’s emphasis on agricultural research to achieve sustainable development and natural resource management funds research that directly contributes to Australia’s pursuit of better outcomes in areas such as water management, soil degradation, biodiversity and climate change responses. Similarly, ACIAR’s projects dealing with food safety, animal and crop health and biosecurity concur with and contribute to Australia’s need to maintain and enhance its agricultural and food health and safety status.

Independent economic assessment of impacts associated with ACIAR projects provides consistent evidence for large returns on investment to Australian agriculture.

In 2006, it was estimated that 65 ACIAR projects analysed delivered to Australian agriculture $768 million worth of benefits from an expenditure of $134 million.

By 2012, a similar analysis of 120 ACIAR projects estimated benefits of $2.2 billion had accrued to Australian agriculture from an expenditure of $379 million.

These benefits are realised through many pathways. There are direct productivity improvements achieved because of new production technologies, or new breeds, varieties, vaccines, trade links and industries. Benefits also accrue from:

- the management of and protection from disease and pest incursion
- increased demand in third-country markets from meeting food safety, quarantine and quality requirements
- environmental, biodiversity and sustainability improvements associated with management of natural resources
- increased trade.
Agricultural research Centres (ACIAR), has a special focus and research competence. ACIAR was established in 1982 to implement the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAr), to undertake research and development (R&D) for the benefit of developing countries in our region. ACIAR also supports the International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs), and these linkages and networks are especially vital to Australian production systems given the reliance on exotic species such as wheat, barley, sheep and cattle, and the foreign genetic resources needed to ensure ongoing productivity gains.

Ultimately, that means ACIAR adds unique capacity to Australia’s innovation system, providing essential support to Australian agricultural productivity, profitability, biosecurity, sustainability and resilience into the future.

In allocating its investments, ACIAR brings together the agricultural R&D priorities of partner countries with the needs, interests and capabilities of Australian researchers. These interests are pursued by commissioning collaborative research between international, Australian and developing country organisations in areas where Australia has a special focus and research competence.

ACIAR also supports the International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs), primarily those operating under the umbrella of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), to undertake R&D of common interest to Australia and developing countries in our region.

These linkages build multilateral capacity that can exceed that of individual nations and provide opportunities to share the costs and risks of so-called ‘blue-sky’ projects. At present this includes Australian participation and leadership in consortia attempting a step change in the photosynthesis efficiency of rice and wheat crops.

Situated this way, ACIAR has been leveraging agricultural R&D nationally and internationally into areas of importance for Australian and partner country agriculture since 1982.

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