



Australian Government  
Australian Centre for  
International Agricultural Research

# 10 year STRATEGY 2018-2027

Research that works for  
developing countries  
and Australia



**ACIAR**  
aciar.gov.au



As Australia's Foreign Minister, I have inspected many ACIAR projects across the Indo-Pacific region and observed how the Centre's research partnerships are reducing poverty and improving food security.

Over the past 36 years ACIAR has sought to promote more productive and sustainable agricultural systems and practices. This document refines ACIAR's strategic direction for the next decade and reinforces the organisation's crucial role in building a scientific platform for tackling some of the biggest issues facing our region.

ACIAR's work over the next 10 years will be vital to improving nutrition and supporting economic growth in many communities throughout our region.

**The Hon Julie Bishop MP**  
Minister for Foreign Affairs



Isidora Ramita, a researcher in Papua New Guinea, takes photos of rice as she practices using surveys on tablets. The program was delivered as part of an ACIAR project aimed at exploring the uptake of digital applications for agricultural research. Photo: Conor Ashleigh

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**Cover photo:** Members of the Ratu Rani Women's Agriculture Collective in Bhaluwa village, Nepal, walking to a field with rice seedlings. The group is just one of many that are part of the ACIAR conservation agriculture project spanning the Eastern Gangetic Plains of Nepal, India and Bangladesh. Photo: Conor Ashleigh

**Back Cover:** Farmer, B. et. al. 2013. *Independent Review of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR)*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.)

# Foreword

**All countries in the Indo-Pacific region are grappling with the complex, intersecting challenges of how to grow more food and reduce poverty — moreover how to feed more people healthier food more efficiently — using less land, water, energy and fewer nutrients per unit of output, while substantially reducing carbon emissions.**

Many developing countries in our region confront the 'triple burden' of simultaneously having significant sections of their population facing chronic hunger, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency, while growing numbers of people are consuming excess calories and suffering from obesity and associated non-communicable diseases like diabetes and heart disease.

The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) is making a significant contribution to meeting these challenges. The 1982 rationale for establishing ACIAR remains even more valid today.

Australia has great strengths in agriculture, underpinned by our excellence in agricultural research. Australian agricultural science has much to offer countries in our region as they seek to improve their food security, by increasing agricultural productivity, sustainability and food system resilience.

In low-income countries, achieving productivity gains in agriculture, ensuring that women have equal access to resources and decision-making, and improving market access or developing new markets for smallholders, are the most effective ways to lift people out of poverty, improve livelihoods, and reduce hunger and malnutrition.

ACIAR's budget appropriation comes from Australia's foreign aid budget. Our investments are guided by the mandate of our enabling legislation and consistent with the Australian Official Development Assistance policy framework.

This ten-year strategy sets out high-level, strategic directions and priorities for ACIAR. It identifies prospective new areas of research, and refinements in our research management. Over the last 36 years, ACIAR has evolved a robust business model as a trusted broker of, and hands-on investor in, research partnerships between Australia and developing countries in our region. This strategy seeks to strengthen and build on that model, not to replace it.

We are strongly committed to the implementation of this strategy, and to further building upon our 36-year record of scientific excellence through mutually beneficial research partnerships in our region.



**Mr Don Heatley OAM**  
Chair, Commission for International  
Agricultural Research



**Professor Andrew Campbell**  
Chief Executive Officer



# GROWING ACIAR Strategy at a glance

**Framing** the ACIAR research portfolio around building the knowledge base that underpins six high-level objectives: food security and poverty reduction; better management of natural resources and more effective responses to climate change; improved human nutrition and health; empowerment of women and girls; inclusive agrifood and forestry market chains; and building science capacity in our region.

**Articulating** and distinguishing more clearly between three distinctive research partnership models: bilateral country partnerships; multilateral research collaborations; and co-investment with development partners; each with their own procurement pathways, governance frameworks, quality assurance and risk management.

**Building** on predominantly project-level impact assessment, to design more sophisticated portfolio-level monitoring and evaluation, to enable better analysis and reporting against our objectives, and to inform portfolio management and outreach.

**Strengthening** the Capacity Building Program to: provide a more rounded, career-oriented training experience for existing scholarship holders; create additional fellowships targeted at female future research leaders; build a more comprehensive and dynamic alumni network; provide more opportunities for volunteers and exchanges between Australia and developing countries; and formalise a long-term, synergistic partnership with The Crawford Fund.

**Transforming** public relations and stakeholder communication activities into a new, better targeted and resourced Outreach Program characterised by: a more attractive, interactive and dynamic online presence; more proactive use of mainstream media; and sharpened publications for multiple platforms.

**Reallocating** resources to create more capacity for co-investment with research funders and development partners; including the private sector, boost outreach, and develop better portfolio-wide monitoring, evaluation, analysis and synthesis capabilities.

ACIAR partner countries and country offices



Indicative resource allocation over the life of the strategy



**Consolidating** the ACIAR research portfolio from thirteen programs to ten, with Research Program Managers (RPMs) reporting to a new Chief Scientist position, research administrative support matched to program workloads, and creating new Associate Research Program Manager positions to deal with cross-sectoral issues more effectively, improve career paths within ACIAR, and provide opportunities for early-career researchers.

**Working through** ACIAR's ten country offices to develop longer term 'compacts' setting out mutually agreed priorities, and transition pathways for some countries towards co-investment.

**Restructuring** the ACIAR executive to elevate Outreach, improve accountability and share workloads evenly.

**Updating** project management and finance systems to improve efficiency, performance and accountability, and better manage risk.

Berina Vhurande from Masvingo Province, Zimbabwe, shows off her lush maize crops that she grows as part of the Mashoko Irrigation Scheme. Photo: Chenai Tsorayi



# Mission

To achieve more productive and sustainable agricultural systems, for the benefit of **developing countries** and **Australia**, through international agricultural research partnerships.



Photo: Dianne Mayberry

# Vision

**ACIAR looks to a world where poverty has been reduced and the livelihoods of many improved through more productive and sustainable agriculture emerging from collaborative international research.**



A cocoa grower in Vanuatu spreads cocoa beans as part of a co-operative effort to improve production. Photo: Conor Ashleigh

We occupy a unique niche in helping to make this global vision more realistic. Over the decade of this strategy, it will be widely acknowledged that:

- » ACIAR is building a knowledge base for tackling the biggest and most complex **challenge of our time**: how to achieve food and nutrition security, poverty reduction and better human health in ways that also improve biosecurity, water and energy security, while reducing net greenhouse emissions and adapting to more difficult climates.
  - » ACIAR is a **trusted science partner** in the Indo-Pacific region.
  - » ACIAR's **enduring research collaborations** within the region and globally are among the most effective, innovative and promising science partnerships, underpinning far-sighted policy, community and industry responses to complex challenges.
  - » ACIAR's **network of ACIAR alumni and partners** represents invaluable social capital that reinforces and sustains informal and formal collaborations between countries, and between Australia and the region.
- » ACIAR is a Category 1 **'preferred funder'** within the Australian science community, offering amazing opportunities for early-mid- and late-career scientists to make a difference through high quality science (often multidisciplinary) with impact.
  - » ACIAR is a **high performing research investor** within the Australian Government, a skilled broker of collaborations across governments and between government and industry, and a crucial asset in Australia's global science diplomacy effort.
  - » ACIAR research programs provide **rich learning opportunities** for Australian researchers at all levels, and help to build and maintain agricultural, forestry and fisheries research capability in Australia.
  - » ACIAR is recognised internationally and domestically as a **leader** in maximising, measuring and communicating the value and impact of agricultural research.

# Objectives

This strategy focuses ACIAR's research portfolio on agrifood systems in the Indo-Pacific Region towards six high-level objectives.

These objectives are consistent with ACIAR's purpose under our enabling legislation. They reflect the Australian Government's aid policy and the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development.

ACIAR brokers and invests in research partnerships in developing countries to build the knowledge base that supports crucial development objectives:

In pursuing these objectives, ACIAR works to ensure that our research programs pay particular attention to:



1 Improving food security and reducing poverty among smallholder farmers and rural communities



4 Improving gender equity and empowerment of women and girls



2 Managing natural resources and producing food more sustainably, adapting to climate variability and mitigating climate change



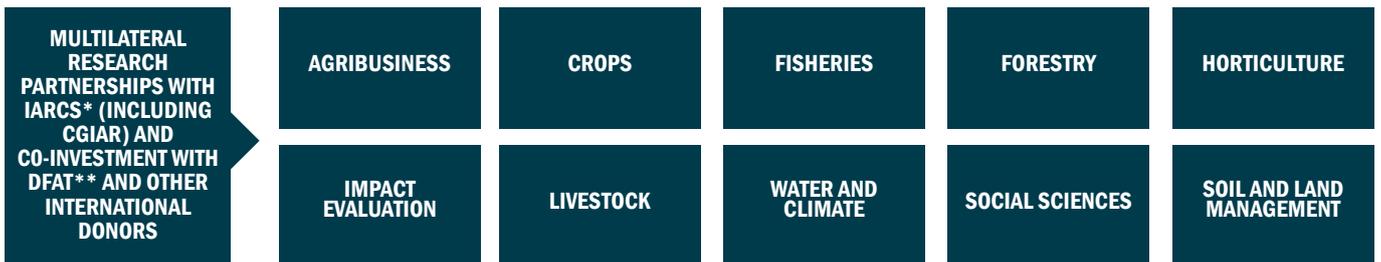
5 Fostering more inclusive agrifood and forestry market chains, engaging the private sector where possible



3 Enhancing human nutrition and reducing risks to human health



6 Building scientific and policy capability within our partner countries



## ACIAR RESEARCH PROGRAMS pursuing:



## ACIAR STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES contributing to:



\*International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCs)  
 \*\*Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

# Strategies for growth

ACIAR is not an aid 'donor'. We are an investor, broker, facilitator and manager of strategic partnerships in agricultural research for development, and an evaluator and communicator of research findings. This strategy aims to strengthen that business model, not to change it.

Our partnership model ensures that partner countries have input into and ownership of research priorities and the delivery of research programs.

This approach helps to maximise the relevance of the research undertaken and the likelihood that research outputs and findings will be used and make a difference in our region, including in Australia.



## Focusing research partnerships

**ACIAR's core business is to identify research priorities collaboratively with partner countries, commission research and broker research partnerships to tackle those priorities, and then manage and monitor these investments throughout the research process to maximise impact and return on investment.**

Since its inception in 1982, ACIAR has evolved three research partnership models: bilateral country partnerships; multilateral research collaborations; and co-investment with research and development partners. Each model has its own procurement pathway, governance framework, quality assurance and risk management. It is timely to articulate and distinguish these partnership models more clearly in order to:

- » determine the most appropriate model for emerging research challenges and opportunities
- » ensure that business processes and systems support each model professionally and efficiently
- » guide the governance required for each type of investment

39

ACTIVE COMMISSIONED RESEARCH PARTNERS IN AUSTRALIA IN FY 2017-18

28 UNIVERSITIES • 4 PRIVATE FIRMS  
• 6 GOVERNMENT • CSIRO

31

ACTIVE COMMISSIONED RESEARCH PARTNERS OVERSEAS IN FY 2017-18

508

COLLABORATING ORGANISATIONS ACROSS AUSTRALIA AND OVERSEAS IN FY 2017-18



Peni Naulgo, one of the 16 farmers that make up the PGS farming company, that hopes to upscale their tomato production to meet the demand of hotels and resorts in Fiji. Photo: Conor Ashleigh

- » ensure that procurement processes adequately test research proposals against criteria of value for money, contestability and competitive neutrality.

## Bilateral country partnerships

Bilateral partnerships between ACIAR and partner countries dominate the current research portfolio. Within these partnerships, ACIAR undertakes regular in-country consultations, and commissions research from Australian scientists (in universities, CSIRO, state government agencies or private firms) and/or international agricultural research centres to deliver research projects consistent with jointly agreed priorities.

Bilateral country partnerships will continue to be an important, distinctive element of the ACIAR portfolio, accounting for around half of our research investment.

Over the decade of this strategy, we will work with partner agencies to develop complementary long-term (up to 10 years) research collaboration 'compacts' in each of our main country programs. Our partner countries share our desire to move towards fewer, larger research projects in each country.

Our ten country offices are playing an increasingly important role in facilitating ACIAR's research on the ground, and keeping abreast of emerging local issues that have implications for Australian aid policy and ACIAR research investments at country and regional scales. We will ensure that each office has the necessary human and other resources to play an effective role in the development and implementation of the country strategies it supports.

**221**  
ACTIVE PROJECTS  
IN FY 2016-17

Photo: Ian McLeod



**\$122m**  
TOTAL FUNDING  
IN FY 2017-18

Photo: Conor Ashleigh



Photo: Conor Ashleigh



## Multilateral research collaborations

As part of our statutory mandate, ACIAR manages Australia's investment in the global agricultural research system, chief among which is the CGIAR\*, Australia is among the larger investors in the CGIAR, ACIAR staff are involved in the highest levels of governance of the CGIAR system, and Australian scientists are prominent in the leadership and governance of the 15 CGIAR Centers.

The CGIAR Centers manage gene banks for most of the world's important food crops, and they undertake multilateral research initiatives that would be impossible for individual countries on their own. This work delivers significant direct benefits to Australian rural industries, and it is important that Australia contributes to these global public goods.

ACIAR will work through the CGIAR System Council and other multilateral fora (for example the Asia-Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institutions (APAARI) and the Pacific Community (SPC)) to promote and support collaborative research initiatives that progress our six strategic objectives.

## Research co-investment with development partners

While ACIAR is primarily a broker of and investor in research partnerships, the ACIAR Act also directs us to invest in the development of research outputs—taking research findings to scale. For a given research project, the investment required to translate research findings into wide-scale implementation may be orders of magnitude more than the cost of the original research. Any ACIAR investment in development needs to be highly strategic and catalytic.

A promising way of tackling this challenge is for ACIAR to invest jointly with larger development donors in co-designed and co-managed initiatives, in a single country, across several countries or a region. An example is the Cultivate Africa's Future program co-funded with Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

Our most important partnership is with our sibling portfolio agency, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). We have a range of co-investments in which ACIAR funds and manages the research effort to build a solid knowledge base for subsequent scale-out and development funded by DFAT. Total DFAT investment in this partnership over the last five years exceeds \$100m. DFAT also co-invests in our capacity building program through the Australia Awards.

Co-investment partnerships signify strong trust between institutions. This pathway enables ACIAR to leverage our resources, access complementary expertise, as well as engage in larger and more ambitious research programs than we could fund alone. As such initiatives mature, our focus changes from research for development, to research in development.



Members of a Women's Agriculture Collective in Bhaluwa village, Nepal, count money earned as part of a project aimed at developing more intensive and sustainable planting of rice, maize and wheat. Photo: Conor Ashleigh



Winnie Maso, a scientist in Papua New Guinea, examines tissue cultures as part of a project aimed at increasing sweet potato production. Photo: Richard Markham

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## Synthesising research, assessing impacts and learning lessons

**ACIAR is a learning organisation. We have a strong culture of monitoring and evaluation, and review at a project level.**

Research synthesis, impact assessment and evaluation processes are integral to ongoing improvement in how we design, implement and extend our portfolio of research.

Impact assessments of 156 ACIAR-funded bilateral projects have estimated total benefits of \$13.6 billion (2017 dollar values) attributable to ACIAR investments. Using very conservative assumptions, this represents a benefit:cost ratio exceeding 5:1, when total expenditure on all ACIAR projects since 1982 is matched against the total benefits from this sample of projects.

However, it is important to note that many benefits cannot be quantified and costed through economic impact assessment alone. We are continuing to expand our impact assessment tools to include mixed-method approaches that can better estimate important social, capacity building and environmental benefits accruing from our research for development investments.

This strategy builds on ACIAR's excellent project-based approach to assessing research impact by adding a greater emphasis on portfolio-level evaluation against our strategic objectives. A new project management information system will enable easier generation of scorecards and dashboards that will provide mechanisms both for

aggregating performance data and for communicating more consistently and clearly at the different scales of ACIAR operations.

This strategy will transform our ability to identify important messages and communicate results with respect to individual objectives (for example gender equality and women's empowerment, climate change, or human nutrition and health) and our overall research portfolio.

## 3

## Building scientific and policy capacity in Australia and the region

**The challenges of growing more and healthier food and fibre more efficiently, and wasting less post-harvest in more inclusive and resilient market chains will require a substantial boost in technical capacity—scientific, managerial, policy and governance—across the Indo-Pacific region.**

Building capacity to inform scientific understanding and the design and implementation of policy is core to ACIAR's mandate. To date, we have invested mostly in post-graduate and in-service training for individual scientists from partner countries, many of whom are now in influential leadership positions.

This strategy commits ACIAR to build on our investment in postgraduate research training for individual scientists, with more value-added training in management and leadership, more short-course training for selected cohorts of people, and more attention to building a network of ACIAR collaborators with whom we maintain an on-going relationship.

Individual elements of a strengthened approach to building capability include:

- » Within large-scale, long-term integrative initiatives, we will work with Australian research organisations to identify strategic areas in which we will invest jointly to attract and train high-calibre early-career scientists, and provide career development opportunities on ACIAR programs
- » We will add value to our John Allwright Fellowship (PhD and Masters) program by incorporating more leadership and management training for each cohort of scholars
- » We will add an additional cohort of mid-career John Dillon Fellows (research leadership and management training) each year, including some Australian scientists in each cohort
- » We will develop a new fellowship targeting women with potential to become research leaders in the Indo-Pacific region
- » We will work closely with Australian research organisations to identify strategic weaknesses in Australian scientific capability, and measures to build capacity jointly as appropriate
- » Through our ten country offices, we will develop a more comprehensive and dynamic alumni program, involving present and past ACIAR-funded scholars, and also project partners, in outreach activities, in-service training and mentoring programs, online and face-to-face
- » We will develop new awards and other ways of recognising the contributions to improved food security and poverty reduction of many Australian scientists and their partners in developing countries over several decades
- » Where we identify institutional opportunities to progress on critical priorities, we will also invest strategically in building institutional capability across whole organisations and/or regions on key issues where Australia has comparative advantage, such as in biosecurity
- » We will look for ways to improve our links with existing volunteer programs and develop new initiatives that facilitate the involvement of Australian volunteers in our projects
- » We will use our partnership with The Crawford Fund for international agricultural research to deliver training, mentoring and outreach activities and support for RAID (Researchers in Agriculture for International Development), a network for younger researchers formed by ACIAR graduates.





A film crew on location in Timor-Leste helping to communicate research outcomes from local ACIAR projects.  
Photo: Sarah Vandermark

## 4 Outreach: extending research findings

**An important priority in this ten-year strategy is to increase understanding within Australia of the impact of Australia's aid investments through ACIAR, and to ensure that more audiences here and in our partner countries can access, understand and use our research findings.**

Informing diverse stakeholders requires targeted outreach, from engaging directly with smallholders in different partner country contexts, to working with international research and donor organisations, and high-level policy and decision-makers. Since 2016, ACIAR has substantially increased our investment in Outreach, and coupled it with Capacity Building under a new senior executive position.

**Our outreach program** focuses on three key audiences:

1. Highly engaged – researchers, project partners, contracted research agencies, and smallholders and other research beneficiaries
2. Influencers and decision-makers – parliamentarians, policy makers, industry and research leaders
3. The general public.

And includes the following elements:

- » A revamped online presence, including a new, more interactive website designed to work on mobile platforms and with greater use of digital media, including images and videos
- » More targeted campaigns in mainstream media, including television and radio
- » An overhaul of our publication strategy, including *Partners* magazine, monographs and 'How to' guides, and our presence in scientific journals, aimed at sharpening the focus on and extending reach into specific audiences

- » More communication activities integrated with research partners, including universities and CSIRO in Australia, CGIAR Centers and partner countries
- » Proactive use of our expanded alumni network to elicit, capture and to tell stories about the longer-term impact of Australian aid investments through ACIAR
- » A long-term, synergistic partnership with The Crawford Fund, with agreed deliverables
- » Well-targeted, designed and convened events - in conjunction with The Crawford Fund and independently - to synthesise, share and promote research findings, and to bring researchers together with target audiences
- » Assisting ACIAR country offices with communications expertise to ensure greater use of local languages and non-written communication in partner countries.

A key element of our new outreach approach is a greater focus on synthesis publications (digital and print) designed to distil the many lessons arising from our research, in ways tailored to the specific information needs of diverse audiences.



Jeromy Kavi, social researcher conducts baseline research, for an ACIAR project.  
Photo: Conor Ashleigh



Philmah Seta, project scientist with ACIAR, working on a vegetable project at NARI Laloki, Central province in Papua New Guinea. Photo: Paul Jones

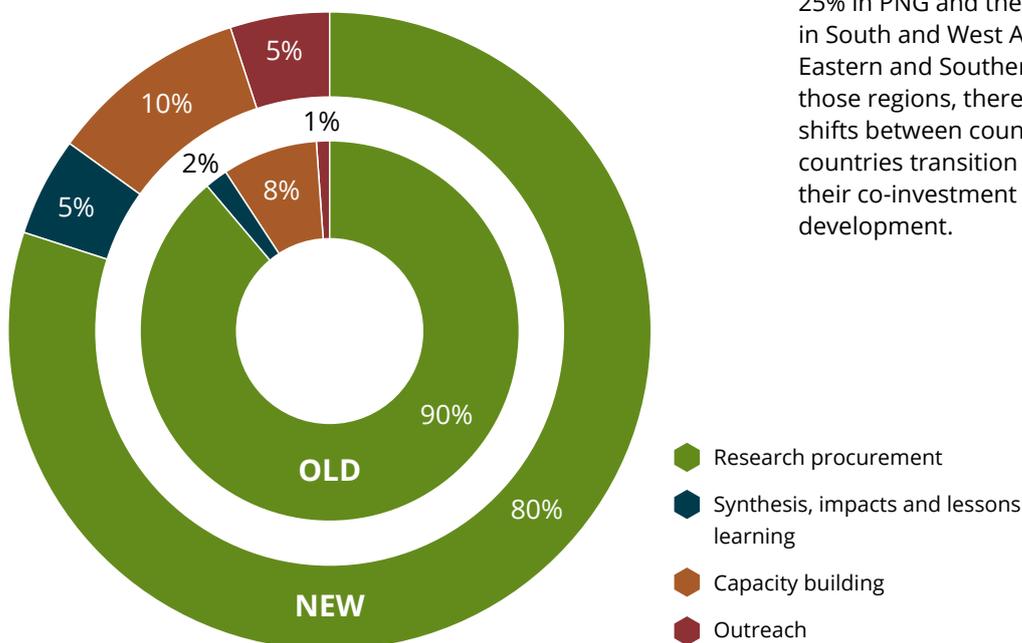
# Resource allocation

**The Australian Government budget appropriation through ACIAR is a highly strategic but modest investment that equates to 2.7% of the aid budget. It is crucial that these scarce resources are targeted well.**

At the core of this ten-year strategy is a reallocation of 10% of ACIAR appropriation funding to improve our capability to co-invest more strategically with development partners, and to boost our capability to add value to our research investments through research synthesis, evaluation, capacity building and outreach. By leveraging and attracting greater co-investment, we hope to grow the total pool of funding available for new research projects.

Consequently, while the share of ACIAR appropriation allocated to research will drop from 90% to 80% (see diagram below), total funding for ACIAR research projects (including funds from co-investing partners) is expected to continue to increase over the life of this strategy.

The geographic focus of our research will not change greatly from the present distribution: our indicative target allocation over the life of this strategy will be 45% of research funding invested in East Asia; 25% in PNG and the Pacific; 15% in South and West Asia; and 15% Eastern and Southern Africa. Within those regions, there are likely to be shifts between countries, as some countries transition to increase their co-investment in research for development.



# Implementation

**The pivotal research management role in ACIAR is carried out by Research Program Managers (RPMs), who guide the efforts of research providers and ensure that all partners contribute effectively to, and benefit from, research activities on the ground.**

Our RPMs liaise between senior officials and researchers in partner countries, and have a 'hands-on' role in overseeing and evaluating the progress of our projects.

ACIAR staff in ten country offices work closely with our RPMs and help Australian researchers to work more effectively with local partners in-country. Each plays a vital role in the development of the partnership framework for ACIAR's program and related negotiations between in-country ministries and ACIAR in Canberra.

This strategy drives a modest consolidation of the research portfolio from 13 programs to 10, with a concomitant reduction in the total number of RPMs. The RPMs will now report to a new Chief Scientist position. We will introduce six new Associate RPM positions to better address cross-cutting issues, to improve portfolio integration, and to provide new entry points for early- and mid-career scientists.

The reforms outlined in this ten-year strategy necessitate structural changes at the senior executive and research management levels, together with making greater advances in gender equity and continued investment in improving business systems. We have developed ACIAR's first Gender Equity Policy and Strategy (2017-21) which will

guide us, both internally and in the research activities we fund. As staffing, business systems and internal processes have not kept pace with the growth of ACIAR's programs and budget over the last decade, these areas are also a high priority for improvement.

This strategy orients ACIAR's research portfolio and business operations to meet the challenges of the next decade and beyond. Our vision and strategies for renewal and growth are consistent with ACIAR's philosophy of continuous improvement, and should be seen more as evolution than revolution.

The detail of ACIAR's research partnerships and programs will remain in the four-year rolling Corporate Plan. Fine-grained annual budgets and project-level detail are outlined in annual operational plans.

We are strongly committed to working with our partners on the implementation of this strategy, and to build on our 36-year record of scientific excellence and on-ground impact through mutually beneficial research partnerships in our region.



Alberto Da Costa, a farmer from Timor-Leste, works on a program aimed at improving food security across major food crops, including sweet potato, maize, cassava, peanuts, and irrigated rice. Photos: Conor Ashleigh





ACIAR is an institution of which Australians can be proud. Over 30 years, it has directed a program of research which, drawing on Australian and partner country expertise, has lifted agricultural productivity and benefited many farmers in developing countries, improving food security and reducing poverty. ACIAR has a strong international reputation for the results it has achieved, its research partnership model, and its record of evaluation and assessment.

Australia is justifiably regarded as a world leader in a range of arid, semi-arid, temperate and tropical agricultural research, much of which is directly relevant to developing-country conditions and challenges. ACIAR has been instrumental in building research partnerships with a wide range of developing-country collaborators and using Australian agricultural science and related research skills to deliver research for agricultural development and natural resource management. ACIAR is an integral part of Australia's development assistance program and a part of Australia's agricultural innovation system.



**ACIAR**

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