

Independent Review of the Australian International Food Security Research Centre

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Executive Summary

The Australian International Food Security Research Centre (AIFSRC) is now in its fourth year in working towards its goal: “to help smallholder farmers and other poor households access sufficient, accessible and nutritious food”. As part of its normal due diligence processes and culture of monitoring, evaluation and review the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) commissioned this review in April 2015.

The objectives of the review, as defined by ACIAR, are to:

- examine the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the AIFSRC as a modality, and
- make recommendations for the future of the AIFSRC after 30 June 2015.

Scope and focus—“The review will assess performance of the FSC [AIFSRC] since its inception in October 2011, and will recommend options for the FSC beyond the end date of the budget initiative (30 June 2015). The review will give particular emphasis to the FSC itself and the strengths and weaknesses of the entity as a whole, and its integration within, and influence on, ACIAR.”

Conduct of Review

The review process comprised six main elements: 45 interviews (including 20 ACIAR staff) and questionnaire distribution to 45 other stakeholders and partners; review of key documents; Senior Management Team (SMT) guidance, initiation and selection of projects for the comparator studies and feedback; aide memoire to the Commission; draft report and ACIAR presentation; and the final report.

Major Findings

Terms of Reference #1—Appropriateness

The goal of the AIFSRC to help smallholder farmers and other poor households access sufficient, accessible and nutritious food was seen as appropriate by stakeholders—although noted by some as poorly worded with respect to ‘access’ and ‘accessible’—as were its mission and approach to accelerating research delivery and adoption of innovations for food security. Both aspects are apposite and the AIFSRC has initiated projects that pursue its goal and mission commendably in the reviewers’ opinion and

that of key stakeholders. The goal and mission is consistent with the current Australian Government's aid policy, and aligns with all ten key specific targets of the aid program.

The emphasis given by AIFSRC to food access and utilisation, including nutritional security and human health, addresses the poverty issue, as its projects primarily involve smallholders, who represent a high proportion of the poor in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). However, with growing urbanisation in SSA and the fact that many smallholders are also net buyers of food, AIFSRC is missing a significant component of food security, namely the interests of poor rural and urban net food consumers. These and other food, nutrition, market and trade policy issues deserve more research attention in future in AIFSRC.

AIFSRC is broadly recognised by stakeholders as being innovative in forging new partnerships with the private sector and civil society in some projects, as well as co-investment arrangements with other donors such as the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. These new types of partnerships did however place stresses and strains on ACIAR, particularly Research Program Managers (RPMs), and lessons need to be learned from this, as ACIAR increasingly moves into more non-traditional partnerships.

The successful establishment of AIFSRC in Africa was responsive to the political imperative at the time. Broadening the geographic focus of the centre in the future, to also include the Asia-Pacific region, would better align with the priorities of the current Australian Government.

AIFSRC is seen by many stakeholders to effectively and appropriately focus on gender-sensitive research and innovation as exemplified in its project portfolio, particularly those on nutrition and adoption pathways. Overall, the establishment of AIFSRC and its continuing operations in Africa are seen as appropriate and an Asia-Pacific node should also be considered.

Terms of Reference #2—Effectiveness

Stakeholders were impressed with the effectiveness with which ACIAR was able to bring a political initiative to reality in such a short space of time. This speed was not however at the expense of proper consultation, as there was highly effective participation of key stakeholders—both African and Australian—in the process. Consultations with the Forum for Agricultural Research in Africa (FARA); a range of workshops in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA); and the conference in Sydney were all key components of the effective establishment and rapid takeoff of AIFSRC.

This momentum was not without problems. There was some confusion—both within and outside ACIAR—about the 'centre within a centre' modality; within ACIAR, over expectations and misunderstandings on roles and responsibilities, and communications and attribution between AIFSRC and ACIAR. Given that the centre is an integral part of ACIAR, an appropriate 'sweet spot' needs to be found whereby the centre is visible externally, but also an integrated program internally driving learning and new opportunities for ACIAR. The reviewers believe that this could be achieved through a revision of the roles and responsibilities for each key person, from both AIFSRC and ACIAR management.

The effectiveness of the centre's partnerships was double-edged. On the one hand, its ability to forge a range of innovative partnerships with non-traditional ACIAR partners

is strongly supported—particularly as they now align very well with the new aid paradigm of working more strategically with the private sector and civil society—and has opened new pathways for ACIAR. On the other hand, as pointed out elsewhere, some of these partnerships severely tested ACIAR’s resources (notably RPMs) and processes, such as in-house reviews and other business systems.

It is too early to assess the effectiveness of AIFSRC in terms of its outputs, outcomes and impacts and most stakeholders could not comment beyond outputs. However, it is clear that AIFSRC is highly regarded as a trusted and transparent partner; has built a strong reputation for its communications program; has developed a M&E program, facets of which could be mainstreamed with advantage by ACIAR; and has been very effective in raising the ‘Australian brand’ and the ‘ACIAR brand’ in SSA.

Terms of Reference #3—Efficiency

As described above, the establishment and early activities of AIFSRC were very efficiently handled due to the prompt initiative of ACIAR that was turned into ‘action on the ground’ by the highly praised and hard work of the AIFSRC Director and her excellent staff in Africa, supported by RPMs and their staff. However, this success and resultant high profile of the centre caused some tensions within ACIAR, exacerbated by heavier workloads for RPMs. The reviewers believe that this impacted adversely on the efficiency of both the centre and ACIAR as a whole and lessons need to be learned from this and solutions implemented.

The reviewers were surprised by the absence of leadership (the Director is currently on study leave) and reduced staffing of AIFSRC at the time of the review and for the preceding months. This needs prompt attention as the current situation is not viable and runs a significant risk of reputational damage to ACIAR and reduced efficiency for the centre. It also made the conduct of the review more arduous and complex. There has been a relatively high turnover of staff in the centre that was reported to have caused some inefficiencies in terms of loss of corporate memory, the need for re-training and changes of roles. The financial and human resource management of the centre generally appears to have been conducted efficiently by ACIAR in conjunction with AIFSRC staff. Similarly, centre reporting also appears to have been efficiently managed. It was noted, however, that the centre only received cursory mention in the ACIAR Strategic Plan 2014–18, a treatment that does not align with the high rating of the centre by key stakeholders.

In relation to the efficiency of AIFSRC’s collaboration and cooperation, these have been considered from the internal—within ACIAR—and external aspects. There has been overwhelmingly positive feedback on the effective and efficient collaboration of AIFSRC with a wide range of national and regional bodies in Africa and elsewhere. The standing and gravitas of the centre are as a result extremely high in Africa, a credit to the centre and its people and to ACIAR. On the downside, the publicity and communications around the centre could have been more efficiently handled to ensure that accolades did not flow just to the centre, but more generally to ACIAR as well. Within ACIAR, there were undoubtedly some inefficiencies in collaboration and cooperation due to the misunderstandings and unmet expectations on roles and responsibilities previously described. On the positive side, these have provided some good examples of areas needing attention as ACIAR responds to the new aid paradigm and contemporary best practices for research. These include the simultaneous needs for both greater nimbleness and maintained rigour; and the need to continually enhance the

management of new modalities with new approaches to governance, leadership, business systems, and resourcing.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has been efficiently handled by the centre with some innovative approaches. There is a need to now combine the best aspects of its M&E program with those of ACIAR. It also appears to the reviewers that risk management, performance oversight and transparency were all efficiently handled by AIFSRC.

Terms of Reference #4—Future options

The options developed take account of the new aid paradigm that has been clearly espoused by the Australian Government and which features greater innovation and more strategic partnerships with the private sector and civil society:

Option 1—*AIFSRC continues in Africa for one or more project cycles.* This has the advantages for ACIAR of further developing its learning and understanding of new modalities and approaches; ensuring that projects are effectively completed and benefits maximised; and further building its credibility in Africa as a valued and trusted partner. The potential disadvantages relate to the government's further reductions of aid support for Africa and competition for funds in ACIAR's reduced budget.

Option 2—*Establish an AIFSRC node in the Asia-Pacific region to target food insecure nations.* This is not mutually exclusive to Option 1. This would build on the experiences in Africa and in consultation with key stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region, identify an appropriate focus and portfolio of projects. The advantages of this option include, the opportunity to bring further new modalities and partnerships to the region; a strengthened centre based on the lessons from Africa; and its location in the Asia-Pacific region, in line with government priorities. Its nature, extent and portfolio would need to take into account the wide range of ACIAR projects already established in the region, particularly those in the ASEM Program. The disadvantages are similar to Option 1.

Option 3—*Mainstream AIFSRC into ACIAR but retain an innovative focus and modality.* Two components of this option are proposed. Firstly, mainstream the best practices identified by AIFSRC into ACIAR's processes and portfolio. This would enhance ACIAR and, importantly, better prepare it to meet the new aid priorities based on innovation and new—more strategic—partnerships with the private sector and civil society, although it has already made progress in this area. Secondly, AIFSRC would ultimately evolve into a 'nexus challenge platform' within ACIAR, focused on a high priority aspect of ACIAR's mission that required greater focus and attention to nexus and integrated multidisciplinary issues than is possible with shorter-term projects in individual programs. It is proposed that an initial focus could be on the agriculture–food security–nutritional security–human health nexus. It is suggested that this would best be achieved by allocating a proportion of ACIAR's budget to a larger, longer duration, collaborative, multi-disciplinary project that also features co-investment and dedicated governance and resourcing. This is strongly aligned with contemporary best practice in research. Mainstreaming best practice and new approaches is a logical and inevitable path to enhanced performance by ACIAR as it continually seeks to adjust its operations to the new aid and research

landscapes. One disadvantage of this initiative is its complexity and potential for failure. ACIAR would need to assess the value and desirability of such an endeavour based upon specific proposals.

Option 4—*Close AIFSRC on 30 June 2015 and cease projects as soon as possible.* While technically feasible, this is not considered to be a preferred option by the review team as the resultant opposition that would inevitably arise—clearly enunciated by some high level stakeholders—would have the great likelihood of causing substantial reputational harm to ACIAR, the Australian agricultural research community and the Australian ‘brand’. It could also trigger diplomatic embarrassment for the government. Against these substantial risks, the resultant financial gains to ACIAR would be marginal and potential benefits sacrificed large. This option should not be contemplated for these reasons.

In conclusion, the reviewers believe that AIFSRC has generally satisfied the criteria for appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency identified in the terms of reference. In some aspects it has far exceeded expectations, while in others there are provisos that are mainly associated with the efficient and effective management of the new modality in ACIAR, that have provided a range of lessons to be learned for future developments.

Recommendations

1. Effective interim leadership of AIFSRC should be put in place immediately, either from within or outside of ACIAR, as the *status quo* is not desirable.
2. With immediate effect, AIFSRC should be retained and resourced in SSA by ACIAR (i.e. Option 1). Within 2 years, consideration should be given to broadening its geographic focus to include the Asia–Pacific region (i.e. adding Option 2). This would help to maximise the benefits to all stakeholders, including ACIAR, through continued and new outputs from the action-based research portfolio.
3. AIFSRC should steadily evolve in the medium term (2–5 years) through Option 3a into a ‘nexus challenge platform’ of ACIAR, effectively targeting major, emerging, researchable challenges important to ACIAR’s mission that require a nexus, more integrated and longer term approach than is possible to achieve with shorter term projects managed from individual programs. In order to achieve this, it is recommended that ACIAR allocate an appropriate portion of its budget to the contemporary ‘best practice’ research paradigm based on larger, longer duration, collaborative, multidisciplinary projects, that are also exemplified by co-investment and dedicated governance, leadership, staffing and resourcing.
4. In line with recommendation 3, it is proposed that ACIAR—in the medium term (2–5 years)—make the focus for this evolved ‘nexus challenge platform’, the agriculture–food security–nutritional security–human health nexus, as an integral part of its overall portfolio (i.e. Option 3b). This would be in support of the Australian Government’s aid strategy (DFAT 2015, p. 10) and the ACIAR Strategic Plan 2014–18 (ACIAR 2014, p. 7). This new initiative would be global in scope, with particular initial emphasis in the Indo–Pacific region and build upon the excellent portfolio developed in SSA by AIFSRC. It would involve innovative new partnerships—including with the private sector and civil society—across sectors, both national and international and potentially co-investments. It would also stimulate more cross-program collaboration within ACIAR and strengthen the focus on policy research

and evidence-based advocacy. Such a new modality will require new management arrangements, new resourcing, and new business and research processes.

5. Enhance research on understanding the complexities of the adoption process, adoption constraints and accelerating adoption across the ACIAR portfolio, by building on and integrating the action-research forged by AIFSRC in Africa and the current ACIAR adoption studies in the ASEM, IA and other programs. In this way an explicit linkage between *ex post* and *ex ante* impact assessments can be forged over time, with attendant implications for priority setting in ACIAR. This also would meet the intent of recommendation 11 in the 2013 Independent Review of ACIAR (Farmer et al. 2013).
6. Drawing upon the experience with AIFSRC, ACIAR examine the comparative transactions costs and benefits of its current approaches to commissioning projects versus open competitive grants, or variations in between, such as the 'expressions of interest' approaches that ACIAR has used in Timor Leste and Indonesia. This would help to enhance ACIAR's efforts in continually striving to be more innovative and nimble, without sacrificing its well-earned reputation as an 'engaged partner' that adds value to collaborative relationships, *albeit* at sometimes significant time and transactions costs.
7. Whichever option for the future of AIFSRC is chosen by ACIAR, it is imperative for the avoidance of adverse reputational risk and to reap the benefits, that existing AIFSRC projects in SSA proceed to their logical conclusions with adequate and, if justified, extended funding.
8. The roles and responsibilities of the AIFSRC Director be clarified to ensure a collegial relationship with the SMT and Research Program Managers.
9. The M&E programs of AIFSRC and ACIAR should be fully integrated as a matter of urgency, combining the best features of both. Similarly, there should be integration of the communications programs of AIFSRC and ACIAR. To avoid past issues related to attribution, in future there should be clear guidelines as to any distinction made between ACIAR and AIFSRC, as organisationally they are one and the same.
10. The value and desirability of forming an International Advisory Committee for AIFSRC, as originally proposed in the AIFSRC Strategy, should be revisited.
11. Regardless of which option for the future of AIFSRC is chosen, ACIAR should continue to further enhance its efforts in gender-sensitive research.
12. Given the high profile and standing of AIFSRC, ACIAR should develop a plan for communicating its intentions for the future of AIFSRC that takes into account all likely reactions to future decisions, whether positive or negative for the centre.