

Fowl or Fish? A submission to the ACIAR Review

by Robin Davies and Stephen Howes

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The [Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research](#) (ACIAR) is a very important organisation. It is the only aid agency in Australia which has legislative backing, something that the much bigger AusAID lacks. More importantly, although its funding consists of only a small part of the Australian aid program, it is one of the largest funders of agricultural research for development in the world. In 2012-13, ACIAR will manage around \$US120 million, or (we estimate) about 13% of global ODA in support of agricultural research for development, with funding more than 50% greater than that of the largest member agencies of the 15-member [Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research](#) (CGIAR). Compare this to the 3-4% that constitutes Australia's share of global ODA for all purposes, and the importance of ACIAR becomes apparent.

It's good that Australia gives such prominence to agricultural research. Aid will increasingly be required to fund international public goods such as this: the case for giving similar prominence to medical research has been repeatedly [rehearsed](#) on this blog. And ACIAR reports very high rates of return on its projects, at around 50:1 (including benefits to Australia, which constitute around 10% of total benefits). But this doesn't mean that there is no room for improvement. One problem is that ACIAR as a whole has been subject to little external scrutiny in recent years, with the [last major review](#) [pdf] held in 1998.

For this reason, Foreign Minister Carr's August 2012 [announcement](#) that ACIAR would be subject to an external review was a welcome one. By now, the [Farmer Review](#) should have reported to Foreign Minister Carr (the deadline was the end of last year).

The Review called for submissions, and we made one. Surprisingly, submissions aren't posted on the review's website, but [here is a link](#) to ours.

Our submission covered seven topics:

- ACIAR's objective: discussed below.
- ACIAR's role in funding and engaging with the CGIAR system: is there a conflict of interest?
- ACIAR's role in implementing development projects: the vexed issue of how to get ACIAR and AusAID to work better together.
- ACIAR's approach to sourcing expertise: where we argued for more competitive mechanisms.
- The geographical distribution of ACIAR's activities: the Africa question.
- Impact evaluations of ACIAR's research programs: can we believe the reported 50:1 rate of return?
- The Australian International Food Security Centre (ACIAR's new centre within a centre): does it make sense?
- The 2011-12 Strategic Framework Panel: the oddness of ACIAR's commissioning an external panel to develop a scaling-up strategy (the early-2012 Chubb Panel) not long before being subjected to a full external review (the late-2012 Farmer Review).

In this post we delve into the first of these topics, ACIAR's objective, or lack of one. If you're interested in the other topics, please take a look at our submission.

ACIAR has never had an explicit statement of objective defined for it in government policy. It needs one. ACIAR's own account of its objective, as currently articulated on its website, is that: "[ACIAR] encourages Australia's agricultural scientists to use their skills for the benefit of developing countries and Australia. ACIAR funds research projects that are developed within a framework reflecting the priorities of Australia's aid program and national research strengths, together with the agricultural research and development priorities of partner countries."

There are three problems with this informal statement of objective.

First, it incorporates a mutual benefits rationale and restricts funding to Australian sources of expertise. Neither of these elements corresponds to anything in ACIAR's legislated statement of functions, which contains no mention of benefits to Australia, direct or indirect, or exclusive reliance on Australian expertise.

Second, it conveys no sense of complementarity: it establishes no specific niche for ACIAR that would assist in determining whether a particular activity or strategy were likely to meet a need that would or would not be met more effectively or efficiently by another agency, including any of the 15 CGIAR agencies. Elements of ACIAR's current research programs fall into areas covered by and engage researchers who

receive funding from CGIAR agencies. For example, forestry research is undertaken by both ACIAR and the Bogor-based Centre for International Forestry Research, which frequently engages Australian researchers who also receive funding from ACIAR.

Third, the objective ignores significant functions defined in ACIAR's Act: "to conduct and fund development activities related to [its] research programs" and "to fund international agricultural research centres." The first of these two functions was added by legislative amendment in 1992, following the "sunset" review of ACIAR conducted by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.

The absence of a formal statement of ACIAR's overarching objective is problematic. It has allowed a situation to develop where ACIAR's activities, uniquely among activities supported by the Australian aid program, are routinely justified on the basis of mutual benefits considerations. It has contributed to a lack of clarity about the kind of organisation that ACIAR is intended to be: is it a domestic research funding council whose field is international agricultural development, or a species of development organisation capable of operating along the research and development spectrum and leading Australia's engagement with the CGIAR system? (Is it, in the terms of our title, fowl or fish?) And it has also obscured the question of whether some elements of ACIAR's work might not be carried out more effectively and efficiently by the CGIAR agencies that Australia also funds via ACIAR and AusAID.

It also seems to be the case that the narrative used to describe ACIAR's aims and activities represents a frozen view of the role of the aid program. Since ACIAR's creation, much of the aid program has been untied. The commercial objective of the aid program was explicitly removed by Minister Downer in the late 1990s, and over time the national interest benefits of the aid program have been downplayed. Given that ACIAR's current practice of tying aid to Australian researchers and justifying results in terms of mutual benefits are not required by legislation, the question must be asked whether ACIAR should not be brought into line with the rest of the aid program.

Indeed, it can be convincingly argued that ACIAR has not utilised the flexibility provided by its legislation. The best way of identifying and solving the agricultural problems of developing countries (the essence of what ACIAR's legislation requires of it) might change over time. While the aid program has progressed, ACIAR has been left behind (this flexibility notwithstanding).

While it seems clear to us that the commercial benefits to Australia should receive less or no weight, there might be arguments for continuing to tie our aid to

Australian researchers. After all much, though not all, research and scholarship support from the Australian aid program is still tied to Australian institutions. However, there might equally be a case for looking outward and allowing or encouraging ACIAR to seek out the best researchers wherever they are, rather than the best Australian researchers. For example, ACIAR might open a competitive funding window which would be available to researchers worldwide. Or it might create incentives for Australian researchers to partner with other developed and developing country researchers.

The Farmer Review should recommend an overarching goal for ACIAR's work, to be adopted as government policy after whole-of-government consideration, which would provide full consistency with the existing goal of Australia's aid program. The focus should be on development benefits, not mutual benefits. The approach should be to address those needs identified as important to Australia's aid objectives that are not adequately met by other mechanisms. These needs might well be defined in such a way that Australian sources of expertise are highly relevant, but consideration should be given to moving in the direction of untying ACIAR funding so that it can do more to draw on the world's best researchers, wherever they are.

Our vision for ACIAR is as an international fish rather than a domestic fowl. We hope that the Farmer Review agrees.

Robin Davies is Associate Director of the [Development Policy Centre](#). Stephen Howes is Director of the Centre.

Author/s:

Robin Davies

Robin Davies is an Honorary Professor at the ANU's Crawford School of Public Policy and Managing Editor of the Devpolicy Blog. He previously held senior positions at Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and AusAID.

Stephen Howes

Stephen Howes is Director of the Development Policy Centre and Professor of Economics at the Crawford School of Public Policy at The Australian National University.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/fowl-or-fish-a-submission-to-the-aci-ar-review-20130129/>