A NEW AID INITIATIVE FROM AUSTRALIA

ACIAR

David McWilliam, ACIAR's first director. "It is perhaps the only industrial country whose domestic agricultural research experience has been gained in climatic conditions that closely correspond to those in regions in which one-third of the world's poorest people live. There was nothing unique about our experience in, say, energy or health or industrial research. But our agricultural research had a special relevance for developing countries." In much of its research, he adds, Australia has developed a strong mission-oriented focus on problems of crop and animal systems common to much of the developing world.

A trust fund has been established to support ACIAR. It will receive annual appropriations from Australia's aid budget. The initial three-year commitment is about 3 percent of this budget, or AU$25 million (CA$27 million). "This may seem to be a small component, but, because it involves interaction between scientists, its long-term cumulative effect can be substantial," says Dr McWilliam, former Professor of Agronomy and Head of the Department of Agronomy and Soil Science at the University of New England in New South Wales.

The Australian government decided on a research orientation for its new development assistance initiative because it was convinced the value of research had been proven. Dr McWilliam cites the success of various members of the worldwide network of International Agricultural Research Centres (IARCS) in increasing food production in the developing world. The IR36 rice variety developed by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), for example, has become the most widely grown variety of any food crop in the world has ever known. Agricultural economists estimate that Asian farmers harvest an additional five million tonnes of rice each year, and gain more than CA$1 billion extra income by planting this variety.

"While Australia fully realizes," says Dr McWilliam, "that research IS only one of the inputs needed to improve agricultural outputs in developing countries — along with credit, infrastructure, and marketing, for example — it nevertheless plays an important catalytic role in encouraging investment in other components of the agricultural system."

The ACIAR's initial research priorities have been grouped into 10 programs: soil management and land use, plant improvement, plant protection, plant nutrition, animal production, animal health, farming systems, postharvest technology, forestry, and agricultural economics. The Centre will also place emphasis on communicating its research results through publications and other means.

Although ACIAR is barely a year old, it has already launched projects to improve storage of grain in the tropics and to develop high-yielding cultivars of pigeon pea, which is particularly suited to semiarid environments in Asia and Africa. In India, researchers are investigating more efficient use of rice and straw as animal feed. The Centre is also helping to develop a computer-based system to identify virus diseases of plants, particularly tropical legumes.

The ACIAR will focus primarily on Australia's near neighbours, including Southeast Asia, Papua New Guinea and the South Pacific islands, and South Asia. It also intends to work with scientists in certain countries in tropical and subtropical Africa south of the Sahara, as well as other countries if it has the particular expertise needed.

Australia, through its international aid program, makes a significant contribution to the core funding of the IARCS. Because of this, ACIAR hopes to maintain close and active links with the IARCS, concentrating its collaborative research efforts on them by means of their outreach programs, in which they work alongside developing country scientists in national programs.

In some respects, ACIAR has been based on the IDRC model, says Dr McWilliam, noting in particular the similarity between his Centre and IDRC's cooperative programs, which promote collaboration between Canadian and developing country researchers.

"ACIAR's philosophy is based on a partnership approach. We believe the most effective form of research aid will come from a close collaboration that results in a strengthening of the developing countries' capacities to solve their own problems through research. Our motives are both humanitarian and enlightened self-interest — the two are not mutually exclusive."