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THE HILL AGRICULTURE RESEARCH PROJECT – Status and Achievements

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the status and activities of the Hill Agriculture Research Project (HARP) funded by the Department for International Development (UK) (DFID). It describes the major strengths and achievements of HARP and the Hill Research Programme (HRP) component. HARP aimed through HRP to demonstrate the benefits of the competitive grant system (CGS) in agricultural research in Nepal. With 131 sub-projects funded and implemented through HARP across the hills of Nepal, it clearly demonstrated the potential of delivering projects' outputs through better practice of the CGS. As a result, the government has created the National Agriculture Research and Development Fund (NARDF) to provide continuity of CGS in the country and HARP is fully supportive in strengthening NARDF. Future work with the NARDF component of HARP will be to make NARDF an effective, sustainable, and independent body.

Introduction

The Hill Agriculture Research Project (HARP) was a five-year project (1996-2001) funded by the Department for International Development (UK) (DFID) in Nepal, and later extended for three years (2001-2004). HARP is a follow-up of two long-term projects previously supported by the UK Government at the Pakhribas and Lumle Agricultural Centres, in the mid-hill districts of the eastern and western regions of Nepal. Some block grant funding to the two centres was continued for the duration of HARP Phase I at a much reduced level and it decreased annually. When the decision to reduce the block grant funding was made, it was agreed that a competitive grant fund called the Hill Research Programme (HRP) should be established in its place, to support both public and private sector agricultural research in the hill regions of Nepal. It was initially opened only to a restricted number of the hill research stations of the National Agriculture Research Council, Nepal (NARC).

The goal of HARP is “enhanced livelihoods of hill families on a sustainable basis”. The project’s purpose is to “establish a sustainable and effective hill agriculture research system”. HRP, as one of the major components of HARP, was designed with the objective of supporting the development of high-quality research outputs, which address the problems and production constraints of hill farming families in Nepal. The programme supports research projects that address the agricultural perspective plan (APP), which is the official strategy document for agricultural development in Nepal for a 20-year period beginning in 1995. HRP aimed to demonstrate the benefits of

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The HRP Project Cycle

A call for project concept notes (PCNs) is made annually in the local press during the month of July. A PCN template is provided either on paper or computer diskette by the HARP office.

Assessments of PCNs and full project proposals (PPs) are carried out through a process of peer review by independent assessors who remain anonymous to the applicants; the process is the same across all programme areas. All assessors are given training in how the assessment process should be undertaken.

Each proposal is sent to a minimum of three reviewers. While assessment will always contain an element of subjectivity, the procedure adopted by HRP tries to be as objective as possible. Assessment is made against a series of questions and a score is then assigned. At the end of the concept note assessment process, each assessor has to rank the PCNs and the PPs (HARP 2000).

All PCNs and PPs assessed by the peer reviewers are compiled at the HARP Secretariat for discussion at the TSC. The TSC discusses thoroughly each PCN and PP submitted by the research providers. Finally, based on the general consensus of the TSC, it is decided whether the projects are to be funded or not or in a few cases recommended for re-submission. Then, with the permission of the Chairman of the Steering Committee, the Steering Committee is called upon for final decisions in selecting projects for funding. Those decisions made in the TSC are presented at the Steering Committee meeting. The Steering Committee makes the final decisions and recommendations for funding of approved projects through HARP.

Status of HRP-Funded Projects

The priorities for allocating funding to different research topics were developed by the TSC based upon the stated objectives of the APP for hill agriculture development. Every year, prior to the call for concept notes, the TSC re-examines the amount of research funding currently allocated to the APP priority topics and adjusts the amount of new funds to each accordingly. There have been five calls for PCNs since 1997.

Prior to the call for PCNs, training in concept note and full proposal writing was given by HARP to the staff that would be submitting the proposals. Assessors were also given training in the methodologies of assessment required by the HARP Secretariat. Based upon the feedback and the experience gained, both by scientists submitting proposals and the assessors evaluating them, the procedures for making awards and for the training courses have been refined and updated.

HRP was a major feature of the first phase of HARP and had two functions. Firstly, it aimed to support the generation of new and appropriate technologies for hill farmers, particularly women and marginalised groups and secondly, it aimed to demonstrate

project. HARP I demonstrated that a competitive research fund could operate successfully and encourage collaborative and productive research; it was largely responsible for the establishment of NARDF by HMGN.

NARDF is controlled by a Fund Management Committee and supports, on a competitive basis, both research and development activities. HARP II is guiding and assisting the development and establishment of NARDF based on experiences gained in the HRP project and through the provision of appropriate financial, physical, and logistical support.

Impact of HARP

In late 1999, it was recognised that an immediate impact on the livelihoods of farming households by most of the HRP-funded projects, although highly desirable, was unlikely to be achieved, due to their original research and technology generation based design. The need to be more specific in addressing issues of technology uptake by a broader base of end-users led to the inclusion of a description of potential uptake pathways in the assessment criteria for HRP-funded projects.

At the last HARP review (March 2001), the concept of uptake pathways (UPs) for each of the HRP-funded projects was introduced. The development of UPs was conceived as a means of enabling a more effective delivery of research outputs to farmers. It was left for HARP to foster appropriate mechanisms that would work within the Nepalese context. Based on this, and as a pilot test, project leaders of HRP-funded projects were invited to submit UP proposals to HARP.

UP proposals were evaluated internally by HARP; a total of 18 were approved and of these 6 have been successfully completed. The UP projects are dominated by crop and crop-based interventions; only three projects (17%) focus on livestock. Areas of focus have been niche crops/markets and post-harvest handling and marketing, key areas where a significant impact can be made.

Support to NARC

One of HARP's objectives was to support the institutional change process envisaged in NARC's 'Vision 2021'. 'Vision 2021' proposes the creation of two organisations from the current NARC. One is an overarching body responsible for coordinating and guiding national agricultural research (NARC). The other is a public-sector implementing agency or board (the Nepal Agricultural Research Executive Board (NAREB)). HARP's support consisted of organising workshops to explain the 'Vision 2021' document, and assisting in consensus building and the development of an implementation plan.

At the moment there are three active groups concerned with core functions, human resources, and funding. The fourth group, which will deal with legislative issues, has not yet been created. These groups are (1) the Funding Working Group; (2) the Human Resource Working Group; and (3) the Core Function Working Group (HARP 2003).

The Future of HARP

Some of the major reasons for continuing HARP activities in the future are described below.

- i. Out of 30 current projects, 18 HRP-funded projects will be completed by mid-July 2003 and the remaining 12 will continue until September 2004. In order to manage, monitor, and evaluate these, the HRP component of HARP will need to continue until December 2004 when the existing, 3-year, HRP-funded projects will have been completed and properly documented. In order to maintain the momentum of the ongoing HRP-funded projects (in terms of releasing funds, monitoring and supervision, output delivery, and project cycle results [PCRs]), it is essential that the HARP Secretariat continues to provide support. At present, the newly formed and developing NARDF is not in position to absorb and implement ongoing HRP-funded projects; further support and training in fund management and additional personnel are required.
- ii. HARP would like to use its resources in the remaining period of the project to capitalise on the successes of the UP approach by further developing the methodologies and by implementing large-scale UP projects directly involving non-government organisations and community-based organisations with technical backstopping from research workers.
- iii. Outcome evaluations, assessing the potential impact of agricultural research of some completed HRP-funded projects, were done with satisfactory results. This is a new initiative to find out the results, or outcome, of research investment on the livelihoods of hill farmers. The process and methodology needs to be strengthened and promoted on a wider scale so that the stakeholders, NARC, NARDF, and other institutions that are directly working on agriculture technology generation, can learn from the experience and adapt it for their own systems. HARP is working on this development with the stakeholders and supporting its institutionalisation.
- iv. M&E is needed to support the implementation of newly-funded UP projects. Assessing the impact of research projects is one of the major components of HARP's M&E system. The impact assessment of HRP-funded projects has not yet been done. It is now necessary, not only to show the benefits of past investment, but also to establish and develop the methodology in order to assess the impact of other agricultural research projects and to serve as a model for other institutions.
- v. Future work of HARP with NARC will focus on the further development and implementation of current activities, the key element of which is the full implementation of 'Vision 2021', with all this implies.
- vi. Focusing research activities and addressing national priorities as envisaged in the APP and the tenth national development plan has resulted in the start of a process for developing a National Commercial Agriculture Research Programme (NCARP). This will include livestock and crops and will be based at the Agricultural Research Station, Pakhribas. The project is providing technical and financial support to this process. At a micro level, it will involve the same assessment of core function,