

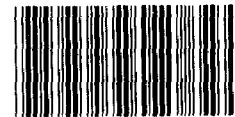


20724 117437
UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

3 FEB 1982

INTERNATIONAL DIVISION

The Honorable M. Peter McPherson
Administrator, Agency for International
Development



117437

Dear Mr. McPherson:

We have completed our survey of AID's agricultural research activities. Our survey shows that many problems relating to agricultural research, identified in several studies and reports by GAO and others, continue to exist. (See attachment for a list of studies and reports which comment on AID research.) We understand that AID is studying these problems through a research task force that is headed by the Bureau for Science and Technology. We endorse this action. Nevertheless, because most of these problems have been raised repeatedly over a number of years, and the Agency has yet to deal effectively with them, we would appreciate more specific information on AID actions or planned actions to address them.

This letter highlights problems relating to the need

- for an integrated research strategy;
- to identify and classify research;
- to place greater attention to research relevance, quality, and use; and
- for more agriculturally-trained staff members.

It also raises other questions about the direction of AID research efforts.

INTEGRATED STRATEGY

In our report, "AID and Universities Have Yet to Forge an Effective Partnership to Combat World Food Problems," (October 16, 1981, ID-82-3), we recommended that AID establish an integrated agricultural research plan. Similar recommendations were made by GAO in January 1978, by BIFAD in October 1978, and by the Technical Program Committee for Agriculture in January 1981. The AID response to our report indicated that a recently formed food-sector council, composed of senior agriculturalists from central and regional bureaus, was establishing a "new set of research project development and review mechanisms." No further elaboration was provided.

Related to this issue is the apparent need for an up-to-date policy statement on research. The Inspector General recently

220524

cited the policy directive on research (PD-47), dated September 1972, as being outdated and needing revision. The Research Advisory Committee (RAC)--composed of external experts who review centrally funded research upon request--made a similar observation.

DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

Research is not clearly defined nor identified, particularly at the mission level, making it difficult to classify, account for, and evaluate such activities. In our report, "Agency for International Development Needs to Strengthen Its Management of Study, Research, and Evaluation Activities," (ID-79-13, February 12, 1979), we highlighted this problem and made recommendations for management improvements. For fiscal year 1981, the Inspector General reported that an estimated \$150 million was obligated for research. Our discussions with senior agricultural officials, however, indicate that no one really knows how much is spent for research.

RELEVANCE, QUALITY, AND USE

The lack of a clear definition of research and the difficulty in identifying and classifying research activities contribute to observations by the RAC and others about the relevance, quality, and usefulness of AID-sponsored research. A December 1979 consultant's report concluded that "the greatest weakness in the research picture is that of utilization of research findings." Both RAC and the consultant's report called for stronger links between the development of research products and their application to field use. Each group cited examples of research projects with little information pertaining to actual dissemination and use of results.

Our examination of reported results from selected centrally funded research projects indicates that they often are stated in terms of numbers of publications, workshops, seminars, and training experiences, with little reference to actual application or field use. For example, AID spent about \$4.0 million between 1966 and 1979 on a wheat breeding research project which the University of Nebraska conducted. The final report on this 13-year effort cited the development of some new wheat strains, international conferences, participant training, and several publications. Yet little information was provided on actual developing-country use of the wheat breeds generated from this research project.

Some people with whom we talked believed that the need to apply research results at the field level was greater than the need for basic research.

A question about the quality of research relates especially to that funded by the missions because of the apparent lack of

review by external experts. For some centrally funded research projects, RAC appears to provide a useful external review which assesses such matters as relevance, quality, and usefulness to AID development objectives. Should mission-sponsored research also be subject to a review such as that by RAC?

A related question concerns the research advisory roles of RAC and the BIFAD Joint Research Committee (JRC) which provides primarily policy and program advice. A question arises about whether AID should consider consolidating JRC and RAC into one research advisory group capable of providing policy, program, and quality control assistance.

TECHNICAL STAFF

Questions have been raised, both within and outside AID, about the paucity of agricultural technicians employed by AID and its effect on AID research activities. At issue is whether AID has enough technically qualified staff to either design or implement projects by themselves, or to effectively monitor project design and implementation by outside contractors. Many evaluations, such as our title XII review and others, concluded that project designs have been unrealistic, overly optimistic, or inadequate, resulting in reduced output, increased costs, and delays in obtaining results. Such problems have been attributed, in part, to an inadequate AID agricultural staff that was technically qualified to evaluate project proposals, designs, and implementation. Therefore, it may be appropriate for AID to assess the real costs understaffing is having in carrying out an effective agricultural research program.

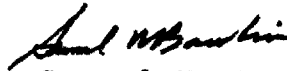
Other questions were raised about AID research activities which the research task force should consider.

- What is the cost benefit of "wholesaling" the small grant research program through the National Academy of Sciences, and how does AID ensure that the research grants are for priority development needs?
- Should AID be involved in financing basic research, and if so, to what extent? or Should AID use its limited resources to identify existing information and technologies and adapt them to developing-country conditions?
- Has AID done a good job in identifying technologies or methods already available which can be used or readily adapted to the agricultural needs of developing countries?
- To what extent do developing countries have a capability to disseminate and effectively use existing technologies?

--To what extent do developing countries have the administrative, technical, and financial capabilities to continue to do research and to use the results when AID funding ends?

We appreciate the Agency's cooperation during our survey. Although we plan no further work on this specific survey, we do plan to consider these matters in our future work. We would appreciate your comments on the matters raised in this letter as soon as possible.

Sincerely yours,



Samuel W. Bowlin
Associate Director

LISTING OF GAO AND OTHER REPORTS
RELATED TO AID'S RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

- "AID and Universities Have Yet to Forge An Effective Partnership to Combat World Food Problems," (ID-82-3, October 16, 1981)
- "U.S. Assistance to Egyptian Agriculture: Slow Progress After Five Years," (ID-81-19, March 16, 1981)
- "AID Needs To Strengthen Its Management Of Study, Research, and Evaluation Activities," (ID-79-3, February 12, 1979)
- "U.S. Participation In International Research," (ID-77-55, January 27, 1978)
- "An Assessment Of the United States Food and Agricultural Research System," (Office of Technology Assessment, December 1981)
- "The Relevance, Quality and Utilization of AID Research," Dr. Edmond Hutchinson and Dr. Samuel Wishik, authors. (AID contracts AID/DSAN - 147-719 and 147-720, December 1979)
- "Overcoming World Hunger: The Challenge Ahead," Report of the Presidential Commission on World Hunger, March 1980
- Draft AID Inspector General Audit Survey of AID's Research Program, (September 28, 1981)
- Selected 1980 and 1981 RAC minutes.