

Editor's note:

This paper represents an assessment conducted for IPGRI's External Programme and Management Review in 2002. It has not been published previously.

The full version of this Impact Assessment and Evaluation Discussion Paper can be found at www.ipgri.cgiar.org

An assessment of IPGRI's Letters of Agreement 1996–2001

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Background

The International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI) issues Letters of Agreement (LOAs) when outsourcing research to partner institutions. LOAs are the principal legal mechanisms for the transfer of money and help IPGRI achieve its broad programmatic goals. The LOA database was created as an administrative tool, but analysis of LOAs can also cast light on the work accomplished through IPGRI's partnership *modus operandi*. This analysis assesses the institute's performance through its LOAs between 1996 and 2001.

Methods

The following key areas formed the basis of the study:

- number of LOAs entered
- monetary value of the LOAs
- regional distribution of the LOAs
- country distribution of the LOAs
- key recipient categories of the LOAs
- key objectives of the LOAs
- distribution of resources by crops or crop groups
- changes in distribution by objective and crops over time
- distribution by project and project activity
- responsiveness of LOAs to IPGRI and Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) priorities
- responsibilities of IPGRI offices for LOAs.

The analysis rests on 1222 records of LOAs signed between 1996 and 2001. LOAs were also analysed according to title and budget code to provide a breakdown into crops, crop groups or themes, and types of activity. In performing this analysis it was found that many titles were somewhat general and budget code information was missing, so not all LOAs could be assigned specifically to a crop or a theme. The recipient partners were classified into several categories, for example national research institutes, universities, non-government organizations (NGOs), CGIAR centres etc.

LOA data for 1996–1999 were available in spreadsheet format as compiled by an earlier assessment. LOA data for 2000 and 2001 were retrieved from the central database at headquarters and from two regional offices. All data were converted into a database for final analysis.

Results

IPGRI issued 1222 LOAs between 1996 and 2001 and reached about 630 different partner institutions in 127 countries. The volume of LOA funding exceeded US\$18.9 million during the period, which represents more than US\$3 million per year, equivalent to about 15% of IPGRI's total annual expenditure.

During the period of study, the number of LOAs increased, while the average size decreased. In 1996, a total of 109 LOAs were signed with an average value of US\$29 460. Thus IPGRI entered into more agreements and reached more partners through its LOAs in 2001 than it did in 1996.

LOAs were increasingly directed towards countries with lower and lower-middle income economies. This demonstrates that IPGRI has focused its partnership efforts more on countries with a need for external assistance. These countries are also more likely to benefit from capacity development associated with partnership-based research than more developed countries.

Over 50% of the LOAs signed and about 50% of all funding was directed towards partnerships with national research institutions. Although these were the formal partners, a wide variety of other organizations were often involved in carrying out the related work. This is in line with the Global Plan of Action for Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture recommendations, stating that broad partnerships at the national level should be encouraged in germplasm conservation activities.

LOAs help IPGRI meet its goals in key areas of research. The greatest amount of funding (> US\$4.6 million) was directed to activities related to *in situ* conservation. *In situ* conservation, germplasm characterization and evaluation, and germplasm utilization together make up more than 50% of all resources committed by IPGRI through its LOAs. The amount of funding directed towards these areas through LOAs increased from US\$464 800 in 1996 to US\$1.77 million in 2001. This reflects the increasingly high priority placed by IPGRI and donors on building stronger links between research and development, and on utilization of germplasm for research that will make real improvements in the wellbeing of farming communities.

Other important types of activity performed with LOAs (in the region of US\$1 million) were those concerning germplasm health, publications and public awareness, software development (including data management and dissemination), training activities and workshops and meetings. These activities reflect the strong emphasis placed by IPGRI on building capacity in national research systems for plant genetic resources conservation and use.

Long-standing traditional activities like *ex situ* conservation and germplasm collection received a rather low level of funding through LOAs. This reflects the assumption that these activities are being taken over adequately by national programmes. It will be important for IPGRI to keep an eye on the development of these activities to ensure that national systems can respond to specific in-country requirements regarding genetic conservation. IPGRI is taking a lead role in establishing the Global Conservation Trust, which will help secure resources to support these important basic activities in perpetuity.

There is some congruence between the percentage contribution of IPGRI's LOAs to the five major CGIAR outputs and the institute-wide percentage contribution to CGIAR outputs.

Conclusions

The trend towards a greater number of smaller-value LOAs is a positive one, since more partners can be reached. However, IPGRI should ensure that the transaction costs of managing many small LOAs do not outweigh the benefits, and the institute should consider streamlining its procedures, particularly for smaller LOAs or groups of LOAs addressing similar areas of work.

About 13% of LOAs were funded from IPGRI's unrestricted core budget. This shows the importance of partnership development. A future study could assess the extent to which LOAs using unrestricted core funds act as seed money to explore research areas and develop them to attract donors, and thus restricted donor funds.

The LOA can be a useful indicator of IPGRI's impact and partnership approach because it is the principle mechanism through which IPGRI engages partners to carry out its programme of work. LOAs are quantitative and formalized and result in a reasonably complete system of archival records that can be analysed to get a picture of change over time.

In order to use the LOA as an indicator of impact and effectiveness, the basic 'passport data' were slightly expanded to allow a evaluation of key issues. In the future, data should be routinely collected for these new data fields so that similar assessments can be made periodically (e.g. annually) and LOAs can be monitored to help with institutional priority setting and targeting of resources. In addition, more information about scientific outcomes and impacts could be built into the LOA database to make it an even more powerful indicator.

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- 8** IPGRI's *modus operandi*: leveraging resources to achieve common goals

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