

# Sustaining a research and development network: Experiences with SEAFRAD

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The South East Asia Forage and Feed Resources Research and Development Network (SEAFRAD) is an informal network of scientists, researchers, extensionists, and producers who share a common interest in improving the productivity and utility of tropical forages. The general objective of SEAFRAD is to provide a structure to enhance collaboration and communication between scientific and extension groups working on research, development, and promotion of tropical forages for the benefit of the rural communities around this region. With this set-up, it is hoped that SEAFRAD will be able to stimulate research programs and facilitate cooperation among groups and individuals.

The SEAFRAD Network was established with the following specific objective to:

- Facilitate communication and networking within and between countries.
- Make new forage germplasm and forage component technology available.
- Develop collaborative research and development activities with national scientists in the tropics.
- Produce and distribute a regional newsletter with assistance from national coordinators.
- Hold annual regional meetings.
- Conduct training in forage technology and technology transfer.

SEAFRAD activities began in 1995, are carried out jointly with Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organization (CSIRO) Division of Tropical Crops and Pastures. Funding was provided by the Australian Government under a special project – the Forages for Smallholders Project (FSP) which commenced in January 1995. SEAFRAD collaborates with the FAO Regional Working Group on Grazing and Feed Resources. Linkages established with many government and non-government organizations in the region (e.g. the LAO-IRRI Project, Lao-Swedish Forestry Project, ACIAR Leucaena Project, FAO Regional Working Group on Feed Resources, FAO Locally Available Feed Resources Project) have been continued or expanded.

## Achievements

In the context of the abovementioned objectives, tremendous achievements have been attained by SEAFRAD under the umbrella of FSP. Many of the activities were carried out with the help of core CIAT representatives assigned in the region and who spent considerable amount of time on network activities. What will happen if FSP no longer exists? Can SEAFRAD sustain itself without financial backing and leadership? In this scenario, SEAFRAD should take on a more responsible international image, with wider membership covering all regions of the humid tropics. External funding is needed to enable member countries to participate. Member countries should look into the future and assist each other on such matters. CIAT's involvement in the network is crucial in providing financial assistance, genetic material, and tropical forage technologies.

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## SEAFRAD newsletter

The SEAFRAD Newsletter was put up to serve as a medium for exchanging results. Production is done on a rotation basis. Each member country takes charge of producing and distributing the newsletter. There are two issues per year. The Philippines produced the first issue and the succeeding issues were published by Lao PDR, then Malaysia, and Indonesia.

The main problem encountered in the production and distribution of the newsletter is not so much the technical difficulties or workload. The responses of member countries reflected some degree of indifference to the newsletter. For coordinators it is an extra task which adds to their already high workload. The responsibility of reporting their R & D activities is relegated to the background. In spite of e-mail facilities provided to ensure greater participation, results have been disappointing. To sustain the SEAFRAD newsletter, some remedial measures need to be taken.

Making national coordinators in charge of the newsletter is not a good idea. Many of them hold important positions and are already busy with official matters. They have very little time for the newsletter. To solve this problem, coordinators must be carefully selected. Each member country should nominate its own representative who is dynamic and proactive. Besides, consideration should be given to language proficiency of the staff. In this way, we can ensure more active participation from members within each country.

This brings to the fore the question about the purpose of the newsletter. Has the newsletter served its objective? Judging from the renewal forms received, it appears that there is a lot of interest even among people outside the FSP project. There is a demand for it, but on a limited scale. Because it is in English, distribution in Asian countries is not as wide as when it would be in the local languages. The newsletter may have outlived its usefulness. Each country should now develop its own mode of information dissemination. Meanwhile the network should aim to have annual meetings where member countries can share and exchange knowledge and experiences.