

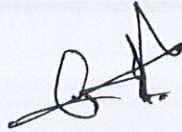
External Review Report

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka Council for Agricultural Research Policy (SLCARP)

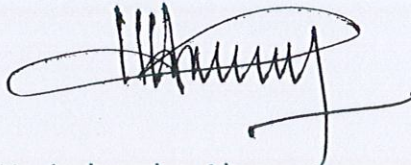
June 2020

Review Panel



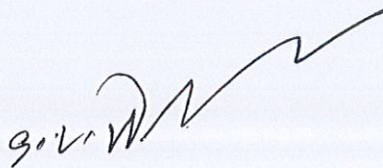
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30th June 2020



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4. Prelude

The External Review of SLCARP is the third of the institutional review series, and has been carried out during the period from January to June 2020 by the review panel comprising Professor R.O. Thattil, Professor Harischandra Abeygunawardena and Dr. Sarath Weerasena. The main objectives of the proposed review as specified by SLCARP are to assess the institutional capacity, and governance and management aspects of SLCARP, and the relevance, quality, effectiveness of its programs and services, and to provide advice on how to improve institutional capacity, governance and management, and planning and implementation programs and services so as to fulfill its mandate more effectively and efficiently.

Review panel has had extensive discussions with the Chairman and the Senior Staff, Secretary/Executive Director, Deputy Director (Research Management) and senior scientific staff of SLCARP, and conducted a rapid appraisal by performing a SWOT analysis with participation of senior staff of the Secretariat. Pertinent information relevant to the review was extracted by perusing the publications, documents, reports, etc., provided by SLCARP. In addition, a rapid appraisal of views and opinions of senior staff of NARIs of NARS on SLCARP was conducted by administering a structured questionnaire, and interviewing key officers of research institutions.

The Executive Summary of the External Review Report of SLCARP provides the broader conclusions derived through the review process and specific recommendation for improvement of institutional and functional capacity and performance of the SLCARP.

2. Conclusions

The Sri Lanka Council for Agricultural Research Policy (SLCARP) was established in 1987 by an Act of Parliament as the apex, advisory, policy and facilitating body of National Agricultural Research System (NARS). The establishment of CARP was indeed a fulfillment of a long-felt need. The overarching goal of its establishment was to advise the Government on all matters pertaining to planning, coordination and execution of agricultural research carried out by public-sector agricultural research organizations, and to coordinate, facilitate and promote excellence in agricultural research in Sri Lanka.

In spite of controversies as regard to its scope and positioning within the NARS, the SLCARP with its broader mandate, and through somewhat changing emphasis and priorities has evolved over the past 30 years as the apex research policy and strategy planning, coordinating and facilitating agency of agricultural and allied sectors as envisaged by the Act. Further, the SLCARP has also gained the much-deserved recognition from all actors of NARS.

The current review covers the period from the last review in 2006. The issues and shortcomings of SLCARP, and possible reforms to overcome the identified issues and shortcomings are described in details in Part I, II and III of the Main Report, and the broader conclusions drawn and recommendations made through critical and constructive deliberations are given in Part IV of the Main Report.

- i) Existing organizational structure of the SLCARP Secretariat, which is considered as “flat organizational structure” needs critical scrutiny in the light of continuing decline of functional efficiency and productivity of the Secretariat.
- ii) Governance and management of the SLCARP Secretariat has been seriously affected by multitude of factors:
 - Rapid turnover of personnel at higher management;
 - Lack of clarity of the tenure and role of the Chairman of the Council; other than chairing the Council proceedings, no other function has been assigned by the Council, despite the provisions are given in Section 11 (g) of the Act; *“to delegate to any member, the Secretary or officer or servant of the Council, such functions as the Council may consider necessary for the efficient transaction of its business” to do so;*
 - Lack of appropriately qualified, experienced, and recognized leadership;
 - Low morale of the staff of the Secretariat;
 - Chronic shortage of scientific and administrative staff;
 - Absence of specialization and mission differentiation within the Secretariat along the lines of key mandatory functions/missions;

- Absence of laid down rules and regulations and standard operational procedures; and
- Absence of participatory approach in deliberations of institutional and financial matters and decision making within the Secretariat, to mention a few.

With declining of the functional efficiency because of the aforementioned deficiencies, SLCARP's role as the apex, advisory, policy and facilitating body of National Agricultural Research System has been seriously compromised. Nonetheless, the commitment and dedication of few senior officers appears to have ensured to some extent its credibility, visibility, and continuity despite rapid turnover of personnel at the higher management and many other limitations.

- iii) Financial provisions granted to SLCARP to execute its mandate, has been reduced (except for funds provided for overseas PG training programs) drastically over the years, and as a result the Secretariat has gradually settled down to minimal level of operation of its mandatory functions.
- iv) SLCARP has established too many national subject committees, and this in turn has overloaded the senior staff of the Secretariat as they are compelled to devote considerable time for coordinating activities of these committees for very little outcome. They failed to attract the commitment of senior staff of NARS, and these committees have failed to provide effective technical leadership and facilitate greater coordination and liaison among the Council, Secretariat, and the scientists of NARS.
- v) Though, SLCARP is considered as the apex, advisory and liaison, and policy, facilitating, and monitoring body of NARS with six broader missions, it has not performed equally well in all six missions. SLCARP has successfully performed its mission as the Apex Research Policy Formulation Body. Performance as regard to other five missions, namely, its role as an Advisory and Liaison Body between Government and NARS, as a Facilitator and Promoter of Research and Innovations, as a Service Provider to NARS, as a Facilitator of linkages between agricultural research councils/agencies/institutes at national and international level, and as a Monitoring Body of performance of agricultural research programs/projects and institutes has recorded mixed successes and achievements. The specific shortcomings, gaps and inefficiencies in performing those missions are detailed in Part III of the Main Report. Pertinent conclusions are listed below.
 - a) As stated in Part II, there has been a confusion within SLCARP about the meaning and purpose of the term "National Agricultural Research Plan (NARP)". As explained by one of the senior scientists at SLCARP, *"NARP by definition should be the "National Agricultural Research Plan" of NARS prepared by SLCARP in 3-5-year cycles in consultation of all NARIs. NARIs should prepare their reteach action plans by adhering to the prescribed National Agricultural Research Policy and*

Strategy (NARPol)". The reviewers too agree with this definition. Therefore, the SLCARP has to redefine this process and engage in this activity in 3-5 year cycles in participatory manner, and such an exercise and a document could guide the Treasury in allocating funds to NARIs and SLCARP for research funding, and thereby, directing the NARIs of NARS to engage in agricultural research in alignment with NARPol and national development objectives.

- b) SLCARP's research and innovation efforts since 2010 have been biased towards few research institutes and disciplines, particularly to those research institutes coming under the purview of DoA and the DEA and agriculture faculties of universities. In this arrangement, many key institutions such as TRI, CRI, VRI, NARA, etc., have been excluded. Further, these grants schemes lack flexibility and leverage, and do not provide the payments for research assistants and support staff. Most notably, the work done on NARP grant scheme is not considered for assessing application for granting research allowance for research officers in NARS.
- c) Most of the scientists of NARS commended the SLCARP on the provision of training programs and postgraduate scholarships for their scientists. However, many were unhappy about arranging training programs, primarily in Asian countries; India, Thailand, Malaysia, and Philippines as they do not see much prospect of widening their subject and technical competencies and broadening the non-cognitive skills by going through training in such countries.
- d) Regular training of research and technical staff through short-term trainings, provided through local and international appears to be rather inadequate, and most instantly they were narrowly focused. Reviewers are of the view that SLCARP should concentrate more on this aspect as a part of improving capacity of research staff of NARS. Many shortcomings, particularly in research planning, execution and analyses, and of course in research communications have been noted. Rationale, rigor and precision of experimentation must be improved to ensure excellence in research and innovations. Further, the reviewers noted there were hardly any training given for researchers and managers of NARIs on strategic planning and management, institutional governance and management, research planning and monitoring, and on leadership and management skills.
- e) Many scientists appreciated the recommencement of National Awards for Excellence in Agricultural Research and Innovations in 2014, and this event could certainly be coincided with the proposed Biennial International Symposium on Agricultural Research.
- f) The quality and relevance of services provided by SLCARP have waned down over the years. The flagship MIS program, the INFORM has become obsolete.

Many scientists feel that it is not much of a use, except adding a burden to their work.

- g) Library and Information Service has become so obscured over the years, and librarian position has remained vacant for several years.
- h) Providing part funding to facilitate scientific activities such as workshops, seminars, publication, etc., needs further expansion to provide part-funding to scientists for attending international scientific events; travel grants, registration fees, training fees, etc., to promote them to attend overseas scientific events, share their research findings, and facilitate network building.
- i) Review of application from scientists of NARIs research allowance entitlement has been made so convoluted and time consuming; many scientists are unhappy about the excessive paperwork and delays occurring in the process.
- j) Though, the SLCARP has made success in developing collaboration with international research councils/agencies/institutes in its early phase, it appears that the activities conducted under the international linkages have waned down over the years. Some of the links have remained dysfunctional over several years. Moreover, SLCARP has not made much attempt to establish formal linkages with national universities and private sector organizations.
- k) SLCARP's role as a monitoring of research programs and institutions needs further refinement.
 - Monitoring and progress review of research are done without much participation and inputs from subject matter specialists and Council members, and it has become an inescapable ritual rather than a scientific review and discourse.
 - Though, the new initiative taken to compile the "Agricultural Research Status Report of NARS" in 2017" is a commendable step, it needs further improvements; the methodologies adopted, analyses performed and inferences and conclusion drawn and the documentation performed must be further improved to make it a worthwhile exercise.
- l) External review of Research Institutions of NARS is yet to become a regular and well-formulated activity of SLCARP, as it has covered only 9 out of approximately 22 NARIs of NARS, and failed to adopt a rational and objective institutional review mechanism and process. The major drawback noted by the reviewers was lack of proper guidelines on the institutional review process. Further, there is no formal preparation by the institution which is scheduled to undergo the review such as compilation of a "Self-evaluation Report" for the information of reviewers. Further, in the absence of criteria and elements, best practices and standards, the reviewers use their own presumptions, and make value

judgments rather than making an evidence-based assessment and objective judgement on the quality and standards of institutions.

- vi) Most of the scientists of NARS are of the opinion that the mandate of SLCARP is only partially fulfilled. This criticism was more pounced from scientists of the plantation institutes, CRI, TRI, and RRI. The reasons adduced are poor technical capacity of the SCLARP to function as an apex body of NARS. Nonetheless, many scientists and research managers, in general expressed their desire to see the SLCARP consolidating its role as the apex body of NARS. Some have seen the progress made in the recent past by consolidating its role as research policy and priority formulation body of NARS. Many lamented about losing its recognition as the "research funding agency" of NARS. As explained by them, competitive coordinated research programs (CCRPs) administered and monitored by external agency such as SLCARP will be so valuable as the funding available through their institutional allocations are relatively meagre, and also the research undertaken by them through internal funds are not subjected to rigorous review as the case with CCRP projects coordinated by SLCARP. Most of the scientists of NARS emphasized that if the SLCARP is to function effectively as an apex, policy, facilitating and coordinating agency of NARS, it should regain its original status as a 'funding arm for research and innovations in NARS". However, as emphasized by them such grant scheme should provide enough flexibility and leverage as same as the grants offered by other funding agencies such as NSF and NRC.

3. Recommendations

In the view of the above-mentioned broader conclusions, the review team wishes to recommend the following, for consideration of the Governing Council of SLCARP and the Ministry of Agriculture. In addition to these broader recommendations, the review team has also made numerous comments, suggestions, and recommendations relevant to specific topics/subsections of Part I, II and III, and they are given in the text expounded under the appropriate headings.

- i) The existing SLCARP Act No 47 of 1987, which is 40 years old must be critically reviewed to make the SLCARP more effective as the apex, advisory, policy and facilitatory body of NARS. The functions and powers of the SLCARP, composition of the Council, roles and responsibilities and the tenure of the Chairman, roles and responsibilities and the tenure of the Secretary/Executive Director, and eligibility criteria for the position of Secretary/Executive Director, structure and functions of the Secretariat must be critically reviewed and appropriate reforms must be initiated and implemented.
- ii) Until the reforms mentioned in Recommendation (1) are instituted, the following actions must be taken as early as possible.
 - a) The Council shall exercise its power to delegate functions to the Chairman as specified in Section 11 (g) *“to delegate to any member, the Secretary or officer or servant of the Council, such functions as the Council may consider necessary for the efficient transaction of its business”* in order to empower the Chairman as the Chief Executive Officer of the Council.
 - b) The issue of holding the Secretary post by a person without any prior experience in NARS must be resolved as early as possible
- iii) The obsolete organizational structure must be revamped to delineate and promote mission differentiation within the Secretariat in line of its core areas. Going along with that proposition, the core functions of the SLCARP Secretariat could be group into four broader categories, i) Research Policy & Monitoring, ii) Research Management, iii) Human Resource Development and International Liaison, iv) Information and Data Management and Publication, and assigned to four technical divisions and allocate scientific and technical staff to those divisions as suggested in Part 1. Suggested distribution of functions among four division is given below:
 - a) **Policy & Monitoring Division**
Functions – Formulation of Agricultural Research Policy and Priorities in 10 year cycles; preparation of Agricultural Research Plan (NARP) at periodic intervals, preferably in 3-5 year cycles; monitoring of annual research action plans of NARIs

and compilation of Agricultural Research Status Review Report in 3-5 year cycles; coordinating external review of NARIs and monitoring of follow-up actions; policy analysis and research by in-house staff as well through commissioned research for identifying sector issues and determining the policy interventions required; organizing annual dialogues with key stakeholders of NARS; assisting the Research Management Division in organizing SLCARP Annual/Biennial National/International Agricultural Research Symposium/Conference; assisting the Information and Data Management and Publication Division in organizing the SLCARP Awards for Excellence in Research and Innovations.

b) Research Management Division

Functions – Nurturing research and innovation in NARS; designing and implementing SLCARP grant schemes; functioning as the key Division in dealing with SLCARP Standing Committees and in organizing SLCARP Annual/Biennial National /International Scientific Symposia /Conference; processing applications from scientists of NARIs for research allowance entitlement; assisting the Information and Data Management and Publication Division in organizing the SLCARP Awards for Excellence in Research and Innovations.

c) Human Resource Development and International Liaison Division

Functions – Human Resource Capacity Building of NARS by arranging PG training and short-term training programs; promotion of international liaison and facilitation of exchange technical expertise/scientists, technologies and germ plasms; assisting the Research Management Division in organizing SLCARP Annual/Biennial International Agricultural Research Symposium/Conference; assisting the Information and Data Management and Publication Division in organizing the SLCARP Awards for Excellence in Research and Innovations.

d) Information and Data Management and Publication Division

Functions – Database development and maintenance; managing the SLCARP library and networking with NARS library system; compilation and publication of SLCARP newsletter; coordinating the compilation and publication of Sri Lanka Journal of Food and Agriculture; coordinating the SLCARP Awards for Excellence in Research and Innovations in liaison with other three Divisions; assisting the Research Management Division in organizing SLCARP Annual/Biennial International Agricultural Research Symposium/Conference.

- iv) Establish an internal committee called Senior Management Committee under the chairmanship of the Chairman of the Council to deliberate and decide on administrative and financial matters, and appraise drafts of Council memos submitted by divisions and units to ensure the participatory approach in decision making process. This should be included in the Standard Operational Procedures (SOPs) that is detailed in Recommendation (ix), given below.
- v) Take urgent steps to fill the existing cadre vacancies, particularly those that exist in categories of scientific and administrative cadres.
- vi) Instead of having 12 national subject committees, it is recommended to establish fewer subject committees, arranged on sectoral basis. For example, the NARS could be dissected into 6 sub-sectors; namely, i) Plantation sector, ii) Non-plantation sector, iii) Livestock and Poultry, iv) Forestry, v) Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, and vi) Floriculture, and accordingly Secretariat could have 6 national subject committees to represent the 6 sub-sectors. Further, these committees should be considered as Standing Committees of SLCARP and each committee should be chaired by a suitable member nominated from among the members of the Council. Such an arrangement will impose authority to such committees and provide technical leadership, innovative directions, and facilitate greater coordination and liaison among the Council, Secretariat, and the scientists of NARS. Further, these subject committees should be further strengthened with eminent scientists drawn from NARIS and Universities, enlisted as part-time or full-time consultants/agreement holders.
- vii) Prepare National Agricultural Research Plan (NARP) in 3-5-year cycles using the SLCARP prescribed National Agricultural Policy and Priorities as the base document, and with extensive consultation with NARIs of NARS. This document could guide the Treasury in allocating funds to NARIs and SLCARP for research, and thereby, directing the NARIS of NARS to engage in agricultural research in alignment with NARPol and national development objectives.
- viii) As empowered by the SLCARP Act No. 47 of 1987, execute the Council authority "to make rules in respect of the administration of the affairs of the Council" to frame rules and regulations. Accordingly, prepare SOPs, based on the Council approved institutional rules and regulations, Government Establishment Code and other relevant Acts and circulars such as Shop and Office Employees Act, Treasury and Public Administration Circulars. Such SOPs should prescribe the organizational structure, functions of divisions, duties of staff, and management aspects as regard to general administration, financial management, auditing, and terms of reference and composition of standing committees.

- ix) The current Scheme of Recruitment including eligibility criteria, responsibilities, promotional pathways and salary structure of key officers must be critically reviewed and amended so as to attract suitably qualified and experienced personnel with prior experience with NARS and to ensure clear path for career promotions.
- x) The Secretariat must pay attention to internalize best practices in governance and management such as strategic planning and management, standard operational procedures, codes of practices, in-house internal auditing mechanism, etc.
- xi) SLCARP should consider replacing the existing NARP and Inter-institutional, multi-disciplinary grants schemes with two new grant schemes, designed on the line of CCRP implemented by SLCARP from 1989 to 2010.
 - a) Thematic and Coordinated Research program (TCRP) - This should be designed and operationalized in 5-year cycles, under the proposed 6 National Committees, specifying the overall scope and objectives of the research program, thereby addressing the wider spectrum of research issues and priorities coming under their purview. These grants could cover both basic and applied research. Further, a given Thematic program, it should offer multiple projects/grants, and promote multidisciplinary approach, and inter-institutional collaboration. The latter could be prescribed as a pre-requisite in submitting grant applications. Initially, only the pre-proposals should be called upon, and once the short-listing is completed, detailed proposal must be developed by the prospective applicant(s) under the guidance of the 'Agreement Holders' recruited as part-time consultants from among the renowned researchers/scientists of NARIs and academics from universities. The research conducted under the TCRPs shall be guided by 'agreement holders' and monitored by respective Standing Committees.
 - b) Adaptive Research Grant Scheme (ARGS) -This should be designed with the aim of supporting on-farm adaptation/testing of crop varieties/ animal breeds and strains as well as improved technologies generated, through TCRP or by any other grant scheme, over diverse farm environments where improved technologies are ultimately adopted.
- xii) SLCARP also should support commissioned research to assess the level of adoption of research outputs/outcomes derived from TCRPs by the intended 'end-users'. Further, the scientists who are involved in the production of such varieties/strains and other technologies which have sustained at on-farm level should be rewarded.
- xiii) The current MIS, the INFORM needs a critical review and it should be re-engineered to make it more user friendly and applicable to NARS.

- xiv) Library and Information service provision must be revamped to function as resourceful library at the SLCARP with links with Libraries at respective NARIs, and it should function as the Central Library of NARS through which the scientists at NARIs could have access to indexed journals, text books, manuals and other important publications.
- xv) Awards for Excellence in Agricultural Research and Innovations must be pursued as a regular biennial activity. This could also be held in conjunction with the International Symposium on Agricultural Research that the SLCARP is contemplating to do. This award scheme, certainly could also be extended to give recognition to those who have contributed substantially during their long-standing careers (e.g. life-time awards).
- xvi) Take steps to fortify the collaboration with international organizations, particularly the linkages with regional research councils/organizations/institutes and networks. Use these as platforms to promote the exchange of scientific staff, technologies, and germ plasms.
- xvii) Initiate linkages with national universities which would be very useful in seeking their assistance in conducting training for scientists and technicians in NARS system as the universities have a large pool of highly qualified scientists in diverse fields and laboratory resources.
- xviii) Explore the possibilities of having formal linkages with private sector organizations such as Chamber of Commerce and allied organizations as the private sector play a key role in agricultural sector such as supply of inputs, value additions, marketing, etc. These partnerships could certainly be extended to seek collaboration in facilitating public and private partnerships in research and innovations and commercializing new technologies and innovations generated by the NARIs of NARS.
- xix) Agricultural Research Status Report of NARS, which commenced in 2017, should be compiled in 5-year cycles, based on the annual reports the preceding years as well as additional data collected on specific outputs and outcomes of the research carried out by the NARIs of NARS.
- xx) Expand the part funding scheme that provide financial assistance to NARIs in holding workshops, seminars, annual research conference and publication of proceeding to cover a travel grant scheme to support local scientists to participate and present their research findings in internal conferences and also to promote networking among scientists.
- xxi) Critically review the existing procedure adopted for the review of applications submitted by researchers of NARIs for research allowance entitlement, and redesign it to make the application process and assessment procedure less complicated and speedier. Further, the applications should be entertained only once a year, for

example in the 1st quarter of any given year for the research work carried out during the preceding year.

- xxii) The future postgraduate training programs should aim at providing training opportunities to scientists of NARS in more advanced countries and reputed universities to improve their knowledge and competencies in their respective research disciplines as well as to advance their non-cognitive skills.
- xxiii) Expand and strengthen the short-term training programs/workshops, arranged locally and overseas, to cover important areas such as research designs and planning, execution and analyses, research communication, research management, leadership, and managerial skills of research staff. Resources available at local training institutions such as universities, SLIDA, SLSI, etc., and at reputed, overseas regional centers of excellence in agriculture search and innovations must be tapped to implement these programs.
- xxiv) Take steps to strengthen the role of the SLCARP as the monitoring body of research programs and institutions of NARS by making the review process more scientific, rigorous and objective as suggested below:
 - a) Monitoring and progress review of research must be done with the participation of chairpersons of national committees, consultants /agreement holders as specified in Recommendations (vi) and (xi)(a).
 - b) "Agricultural Research Status Report of NARS" must be compiled in 5-year cycles, and the report should be generated through "Commissioned Research" or with the guidance from consultants/agreement holders who would be functioning as technical advisors to the 6 national committees.
 - c) External Review of Research Institutes of NARS must be made regular, say in 5-year cycles, and should be based on well-formulated guidelines prepared for both the NARIs and reviewers. This review judgement must be made by assessing the degree of compliance with prescribed best practices and level of achievement with respect to the prescribed standards. A suitable procedure is outlined below:
 - i. Prepare a "Manual for Institutional Review of National Research Institutes" (Review Manual) that should prescribe criteria and elements (*functional areas and components under each functional area*) of the review, best practices (*proven practices that produce results*) under each criteria and elements, standards for (*optimal or desired level*) to be achieved for each element prescribed under respective criterion, and scoring and a grading system. In addition, this Manual should prescribe guidelines for preparation of the "Self-evaluation Report of the Institute", that will give a self-appraisal report to the institute itself and a composite

and concise report of the institute to the reviewers. Further, such Manual should also give guidelines on the review and assessment process for reviewers as well.

- ii. The Review Manual must be introduced to the staff of all the NARIs and they should be given sufficient time to internalize the best practices recommended under the prescribed criteria and elements. The Institutions must also be given training on how to prepare "self-evaluation" reports.
- iii. The reviewers drawn from NARS as well from Universities must be trained on the use of the Review Manual as well on the review and assessment process as well.
- iv. The Review Procedure and Manuals adopted by the Quality Assurance Council of the University Grants Commission (UGC/QAC) could be used as a model for this purpose.

