Women are reported to make up around 43 per cent of the agricultural labour force globally. Their role in small-scale farming systems and the barriers they face in achieving equitable access to inputs are often highlighted. However, this strong focus on women as labourers or auxiliary workers masks the wider contribution of women to agriculture over time in Australia and globally.

The Western history of agricultural development generally suggests that agriculture emerged in the “Fertile Crescent” in the Middle East around 12,000 years ago. What is often omitted is that the initial cultivation of wheat was likely the innovation of Natufian women who selected the best seeds and those most easy to harvest, which they then sowed on specially prepared land as a crop for the following year. Indeed, the prevailing narrative is that European men were the pioneers of agriculture. In Australia, the invisibility of women in agriculture has been facilitated by our policy environment: in 1891 in colonial Australia a decision was made to not count farming women in the census; and post Federation, women were not legally considered farmers until 1994!

Contrastingly, Indigenous Australian society was more egalitarian with women recognised as key actors in land management prior to colonisation in 1788. Importantly, in 21st century Australia where economic pressures on farming households are resulting in a significant decrease in the number of farming families, estimates suggest that women also bring in a massive 75 per cent of “off-farm” income, that is, wages sourced outside agricultural income streams, which is vital to supporting farming families during tough economic periods.
Globally, numerous structural barriers continue to limit the recognition and contribution of women to agriculture which results in lower agricultural production and less sustainable food systems. The obstacles that many women face in agriculture include lack of access to and ownership of land, financing, markets, agricultural training and education, suitable working conditions, and equal treatment including in terms of leadership opportunities. In Australia, women represent about 32 per cent of the Australian agricultural workforce but they remain under-represented in leadership roles. Globally, according to the World Economic Forum, women occupied only 23 per cent of leadership roles in agriculture.

Language and access to formal education are substantial barriers that require significant attention as they limit current and future generations of women involved with agriculture. Worldwide, women generally have lower literacy rates and less access to learning national and international languages. This reduces their ability to participate in agricultural training and policy discussions; the situation is usually worse for rural and Indigenous women. International and national agricultural meetings are frequently conducted in one of the three main European languages (namely English, French, and Spanish) which can reduce the voices of women who did not have an opportunity to learn one or more of these international languages.

It’s widely held that leadership diversity improves the performance of organisations and households. An exploration of agricultural endeavours led and implemented by women suggests that this principle also holds true in agriculture. The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research notes that “if women had equal access to resources, their farms would be more productive and they would be able to feed more hungry people. When women earn an income, they invest in their families, who then become healthier and more educated, which in turn leads to greater prosperity for their communities.” In Mozambique, rural communities have recognised that women working as community poultry vaccinators are often more hardworking and persistent and communicate more
effectively with the women of the household who usually care for the family’s poultry. Improved rates of vaccination in poultry improves household food security and income generation thanks to research and development activities supported by the Australian Government.

In the Philippines, indigenous women farmers are augmenting their leadership skills through a Global Leadership School for Indigenous Women supported jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the International Indigenous Women’s Forum. In Australia, the Carbon8 organisation was founded in 2017 by three innovators (two women and a man) to promote the adoption of workable regenerative farm management practices in support of improved soil health, soil organic carbon sequestration, and improved soil water holding capacity. Carbon8 continues to grow and support an increasing number of farmers.

Possibly, the best news is that there is a new generation of vibrant, committed young women working on the farms, in agricultural research and in agricultural policy development and implementation. With access to the internet growing rapidly in rural areas, young women agriculturalists from different countries are supporting each other to build a more resilient future by addressing agriculture, youth, and climate change.

Beyond agriculture, it is essential that women’s knowledge and experience is better utilised across local and global food systems. Achieving gender equity and improving women’s agency in food systems can greatly enhance food security and better nutrition while also delivering “just, resilient, and sustainable food systems for all.”

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Disclosure
Women working in and sustaining agriculture worldwide

By Robyn Alders
19 March 2024

In West Africa, as in many parts of the world, people are interacting more and more with many and different animal species. This interaction is changing host-pathogen dynamics and infection epidemiologies, increasing the risk of zoonotic diseases (diseases that are transmitted between humans and animals), and the emergence of novel pathogens in new species or habitats. In particular, zoonotic threats like Ebola virus disease and Lassa fever have created serious challenges in West Africa. Their recurrence, coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic woes, is posing a multifaceted threat in the region.

A One Health lens is being employed to identify sustainable options for managing this risk through a new three-year research project. One Health is an integrated approach that “recognizes the health of humans, domestic and wild animals,
plants, and the wider environment (including ecosystems) are closely linked and interdependent”.

A diverse consortium of universities, government institutions, civil society organisations and community action networks in Guinea, Nigeria, Liberia and Sierra Leone are collaborating with researchers in the UK and Australia. This timely research is supported by the national governments in each of the four West African countries and the International Development Research Centre in Canada.

The project research activities seek to answer a range of questions. Has land use change influenced the incidence of Ebola virus disease, Lassa fever and other zoonotic diseases? What is the extent of interruptions of health services from outbreaks? Have outbreak regulations impacted livestock animal health and production? What is the impact of disease outbreaks on rural women in border towns and on food security? Can a community-participatory, gender-sensitive and artificial intelligence-supported disease surveillance system combined with social action for livestock food security work to understand, prevent and mitigate outbreaks?

Addressing these questions will require understanding the relationships between changing demographics, gender equity, land use change and emerging diseases in West Africa. An inclusive and equity-focused participatory approach integrated into socioecological systems research will be used to investigate the impacts of Ebola virus disease, Lassa fever and COVID-19 on access to health for humans and animals, environmental health, livestock food security and sociocultural practices. In addition, we plan to explore the effects of the disease outbreaks on gender equity, and seek innovative approaches to improve this.

Using gender mainstreaming and codesign methodologies with community action networks, we aim to support participatory, community-based, animal, human and environmental disease surveillance. We will also explore agricultural and development practices that mitigate zoonoses and emerging human, animal and plant pathogens through a One Health and One Biosecurity approach.
The field, laboratory and social science activities will run in parallel with engagement of key policymakers and policy implementers at all levels, from regional to local. The aim will be to build consensus around possible policy changes, strategies or systems. In turn, the impact of our research and the likelihood of our recommendations being acted on will be maximised by engaging policymakers through all stages of the project.

We anticipate that the findings of this project will highlight how land use change and other factors have influenced disease outbreaks, persistence, re-emergence or emergence; explain the impacts of outbreaks across sectors; and demonstrate social action intervention for mitigation. We hope that robust and sustainable community engagement in disease surveillance and prevention will identify feasible and sustainable approaches and policies.

The project is in its first year and the team would welcome feedback from those working in related geographical and thematic areas. The increasing magnitude of the negative impacts due to climate change, biodiversity loss and food insecurity means that we can no longer work in isolation or in sectoral silos to tackle these issues. We must work together cooperatively to deliver outcomes that yield multiple benefits for all, especially local communities and their landscapes. We thank you in anticipation of your engagement.

**Disclosure**

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Robyn Alders is an honorary professor at the [Development Policy Centre](https://devpolicy.org/women-working-in-and-sustaining-agriculture-worldwide-20240319/) and a senior consulting fellow at the [Global Health Programme](https://devpolicy.org/) at Chatham House.

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Life for ‘Jane’ as a local fish trader in Papua New Guinea has become more precarious since the COVID-19 state of emergency. “Day in and day out we have worked hard to keep going and to survive during this COVID-19 period,” she said of her situation and that of other women who trade fish from the Sepik River.

A growing body of research demonstrates that women like Jane, together with girls and other vulnerable groups, have been hardest hit by the pandemic. Put plainly, she said: “No money means no food.”

The shock of the pandemic has adversely impacted the lives and livelihoods of smallholders like Jane across the developing world. The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) funded a team of 30 researchers led by The Australian National University and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation to conduct an assessment of food and nutrition security over the first six months of the COVID-19 crisis. The resulting report, COVID-19 and food systems in the Indo-Pacific: An assessment of vulnerabilities, impacts and opportunities for action was published online last week.

The research focuses on five geographies – Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, seven Pacific Island Countries, The Philippines and Timor-Leste - and identifies cross-cutting themes of broader relevance to the Indo-Pacific region. Each assessment applied the same analytical framework, while recognising the existence and operation of very different agrifood systems. The work highlights many
opportunities for governments, communities and private sector organisations throughout food value chains to help ‘build back better’ to achieve more effective, resilient and sustainable food systems.

All five geographies were found to experience these ten pre-existing vulnerabilities, which served to exacerbate the effects of the pandemic:

- Dependence on food imports
- Exposure and sensitivity to climate change and extreme weather events
- Pre-existing and persistent nutritional challenges (e.g. micronutrient deficiencies, stunting in children, overweight and obesity)
- Growing informal labour and economic marginalisation
- Pre-existing and persistent gender inequity
- Baseline data gaps for: agriculture, fisheries, ecosystem integrity, gender, health, nutrition
- Patchy biosecurity, animal and plant health services
- Fragmented value chains and food systems governance
- Rapid population growth, inequity between generations and between rural and urban populations
- Poorly adapted risk communication.

The COVID-19 crisis has placed all levels of government across all sectors under enormous pressure as they grapple with the multitude of issues affecting public health, their economies and societies. Collectively, the assessments revealed significant loss of employment and incomes, disrupted value chains due to both local and international restrictions on logistics, and resultant increases in food prices and growing food and employment insecurity.

More generally, food producers are concerned about the limited availability and/or access to agricultural supplies, particularly with respect to the upcoming growing seasons. These input constraints are likely to result in further reductions in food production, extending food insecurity in the region. Declining food demand and access, and increased gender-based discrimination, were also
identified as concerning impacts in most but not all geographies studied.

The potential for food systems to recover varies within and between countries. For some of the case studies, social protection has played an important role in the pathway to recovery. While the ability of food systems to anticipate, absorb and recover from the COVID-19 shock suggests that regional food systems are far from resilient, there are also indications of regional economic communities collectively envisioning and moving towards a transformation of their food systems.

Six factors of significance to recovery and resilience were identified in all or most geographies studied:

- Availability of imported staple foods
- Variable functionality of food system governance
- Heightened recognition of the importance of food systems
- Significant scope for social protection to build resilience
- Local value chains contributing to food and nutrition security
- Evidence of local food system agility.

The review proposes investment options at three timescales for research and development to strengthen food systems in each of the focal geographies to address the immediate concerns around recovery and to embed the principles associated with “building back better”. Recognition of the interconnectedness of the vulnerabilities identified and the compounding effects these have had on food production and security, reiterates the importance of not focusing on only one crisis at a time to avoid inadvertently exacerbating other crises, such as the ongoing climate risk.

The world has changed in 2020 and agriculture and food systems must change with it, especially for people like Jane, who reminds us: “There are a quite a lot of us in this situation. Not just me.”

This post is part of the #COVID-19 and international development series.
Disclosure

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By Robyn Alders
19 March 2024

Few would question the urgent need to support human health responses to COVID-19 in our region; it is the right thing to do. However, while Australians may feel secure in the knowledge that this pandemic will not adversely affect national food security, the same cannot be said for many low- and middle-income countries.

Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, over 10 per cent of people globally were undernourished and approximately 30 per cent deficient in key micronutrients. Malnutrition impacts negatively on the immune system, placing the malnourished at increased risk of poorer outcomes when infected by COVID-19. Additionally,
malnutrition is more prevalent in resource-limited settings and is felt unevenly within households, frequently affecting young children, women of reproductive age and the elderly. Reports from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and UNICEF in 2019 highlighted that food and nutrition insecurity are increasingly real for millions of people. Significantly, food and nutrition security were also emphasised as a vital component of health in the 2019 United Nations Declaration on University Health Coverage. Malnutrition has multiple drivers, from poverty to climate change to food system failures to deliver safe, nourishing, affordable food. However, chronic under funding of the agricultural sector by both national governments and the international donor community is compounding the problem and will exacerbate the short- and long-term consequences of this coronavirus pandemic.

On the animal and plant health front, the services charged with disease prevention and control were tackling multiple challenges well before the coronavirus pandemic. For example, the spread of African swine fever (ASF) is causing huge mortalities in pigs and impacting severely on household food security and social obligations in Southeast Asia. The spread of this disease, for which there is no vaccine, was made easier due to the inadequate control of classical swine fever (CSF) which spread across the region over the past two decades. Despite the existence of a vaccine against CSF, inadequate funding of veterinary services prevented the effective implementation of CSF vaccination campaigns, rendering farmers accustomed to increasingly high mortality in their pig herds. When ASF arrived, all the farmers saw was more dead pigs, which, sadly, was nothing new.

The latest, and hugely worrying, plant health threat to reach Southeast Asia is the Fall Armyworm. This insect pest has eaten its way across South Asia and Southeast Asia, decimating crops leading to shortfalls in food for people and feed for intensively raised animals and has now arrived in Far North Queensland.

As countries in the region implement coronavirus control strategies, what will this mean for animal and plant health? National budgets that were already under
strain will likely see movement of funds into the human health sector, further stripping sectors such as agriculture of much-needed funds. During the high pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 pandemic, the bulk of funding went to the human health sector and, to this day, H5N1 remains endemic in poultry in many Southeast Asian countries. Will animal health teams vaccinating against economically important diseases such as CSF and Newcastle disease (which is clinically indistinguishable from HPAI) have to cease work due to lack of funding to keep vaccinators safe and animals alive? Will plant health teams undertaking surveillance activities to determine the extent of spread of Fall Armyworm in nearby countries have to cease their activities – whether due to COVID-19 safety measures, or funding cuts, or both – enabling the insects’ relentless march eastward to continue unchecked? Quite likely. How can we learn the lessons of past pandemics such that we commit to adequately investing in animal and plant health and food safety along value chains? If we had taken this seriously after the avian influenza pandemic, we may have not only reduced the impact of coronavirus control activities on food security, we may have prevented it entirely.

More broadly, as we count the costs of inadequate disease surveillance and preparedness in the human health system, we must also factor in the drivers associated with the agricultural sector that facilitated the heightened impact of the disease. As a result of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS-CoV) and now COVID-19, we are all well aware of the ability of viruses that may cause no disease in animals to jump across to humans via the slaughter, sale, preparation and consumption of food from non-domesticated animal hosts. Consumer concerns in many countries in the region regarding a lack of access to affordable animal-source food (due to high animal mortality and market failure) and a lack of confidence in food safety (e.g. worries about food contamination with hormones, antibiotics or pesticide residues) frequently underlie preferences for non-domesticated animals sold through informal markets. Understanding of, and responses to, the drivers behind consumer and farmer behaviour are yet to be adequately researched and addressed.
Human health is intimately linked with animal, plant and environmental health. Systems thinking using One Health and Planetary Health lenses will be crucial to redesigning global and national systems that can keep us safe, well-nourished, healthy and actively contributing to community well-being. This period of forced physical isolation provides an opportunity to reflect on the systems that underpin our society and our vision for a sustainable development. What will be our vision of sustainable food security and nutritious food systems and their contribution to human health going forward? And what will we do to make our plans a reality at home and abroad?

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At the end of 2016, Oxford dictionaries made “post-truth” their word of the year. The word encapsulates many phenomena: the role of emotionality in politics, mistrust of public institutions, the perceived isolation, elitism or bias of experts. The rational observation that our perspective on events differs—depending on who and where we are—has transformed into insistence that all opinions are equally valid. Post-truth means any conviction, firmly expressed, must be given due public consideration.

Post-truth is also about insularity: an inward turn manifest in excessive preoccupation with self, home and “the homeland”. No decent person would argue against care and respect for self, family, community or country. But taken too far, these positive characteristics become exclusionary, destructive and selfish.

This is a sharp turn from the enthusiastic embrace of globalism that followed the end of the Cold War. For most of the second half of the 20th Century, the dominant view of international aid saw nations as interdependent; what happened in one place rippled outwards to affect neighbours. Human health and welfare were considered to be most effectively achieved by peace and good governance. International aid was seen as a type of enlightened self-interest: build stability in distant nations in order to ensure stability at home. Even more radical, global humanitarians saw all humans, everywhere, as fundamentally united in both their aspirations and their ability to suffer. Beyond self-interest, shared humanity was reason enough to help.
A more cynical view is fashionable at present. Bluntly stated: others are fundamentally unlike us; concern for their welfare represents a drain on public finance, something better relegated to charity do-gooders or private capital ventures. Borders are to be policed and rigidly enforced. What happens beyond them may be unfortunate, but not our responsibility.

This post-truth insularity forces us to reflect on the past and what the future might look like. As academics directly involved with national and international humanitarian activities, our motto might be ‘when you’re down, the only way to go is up.’ To outline why we feel so down: Australian Government assistance for international development is at an all-time low, higher degree research students’ years of study no longer yield future security and, in September 2013, for the first time in 81 years, a Federal Cabinet did not contain a Minister for Science. We are not alone in highlighting that the scientific establishment is at least partly responsible for their lamented loss of funding and public standing.

With compulsory voting in Australia, we can’t wholly blame politicians for this situation. We might be forgiven for thinking that Australian politics is currently run by opinion polls. As both academics and humanitarians, we have failed to sway public opinion, or more importantly, have not effectively involved wider society in our endeavours.

University academics don’t have a long history to draw on, as academia, in its present form, largely came into being in the 19th century. In the 20th century, the path to academic glory was paved with publications in high-ranking, peer-reviewed journals and applications for large-scale grant funding. Big money for big science. Similarly, humanitarian assistance in its current form was shaped by post World War II values when high-income economies were growing rapidly. The apparent loss of public support for both the sciences and international development appears to parallel austerity economics and the widening gap between rich and poor in Australia and elsewhere. Twentieth century economic approaches no longer deliver on expectations. Looming and interconnected crises
of climate change, pandemics, mass migration and economic turmoil show that 
borders—whether political, biological or social—are permeable. So at a time when 
societies desperately need to establish global coalitions to combat crucial 
challenges, we find government coffers empty, a disaffected public and little 
stomach for collective action.

Academics are meant to love learning and we now find ourselves with the mother 
of all learning opportunities. To rise to this challenge, we propose the following. 
We believe that academics should return to the core pursuit of academia, that is, 
teaching and learning as a public good in and of itself; science and academia as 
part of (and not apart from) society. We need to do this in combination with 
humanitarian values that promote welfare in the broadest sense: linking human 
and planetary health, recognizing the inseparable interdependence of human and 
natural systems.

There is some good news. The Australian Research Council now seeks to 
demonstrate how research can have social and economic impacts. Academic 
institutions such as the University of Sydney now promote interdisciplinary 
research, teaching and culture in support of a better future. The open access and 
open source movements improve global access to knowledge and technology 
required for a dignified and sustainable life. Renewable energy is growing in 
affordability and reach. We can reach stable and sustainable levels of global 
population. A safe climate—ecologically, economically and politically speaking—is 
achievable. What is needed is a commitment to coordination for the good of all.

Post-truth can promote disaffection, disengagement and isolation. By taking a 
systems approach, incorporating physical and social drivers, academics can help 
fight the trend. Just as society cannot be separated from nature, so the wellbeing 
of Australians is linked to the welfare of people and systems around the globe. 
The drivers that lead to the growing gap between those perceived to be rich and 
poor in Australia are replicated and amplified globally. We have a duty to bridge 
the artificial divide between national and international development. An expansive 
and engaged role for scholarship and universities is crucial to tackling the wicked
problems of our day.

Robyn Alders is a Principal Research Fellow and Darryl Stellmach a Post-Doctoral Scholar in the School of Life and Environmental Sciences and Charles Perkins Centre, University of Sydney.

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Women working in and sustaining agriculture worldwide
By Robyn Alders
19 March 2024

At the recent Research for Development Impact Conference at the University of Sydney, we were pleased to award two outstanding student projects funding to undertake unique international development projects in countries in the Asia-Pacific region. The awards were made possible through the generosity of Mr
Harold Mitchell through the Mitchell Humanitarian Award.

The grants were awarded following an open application process which sought proposals submitted jointly by current students representing different countries - in the spirit of co-design and partnership.

The judging panel (consisting of representatives from the RDI Network and the University of Sydney, as hosts of the Conference) were encouraged by the quality of applications made from students around Australia and the region. A shortlist of the 5 most promising projects was made and all gave a short pitch during the RDI Student Forum. Two winners were chosen from among these to be provided with financial support towards the implementation of their idea. The awarded projects will report back within 12 months.

The shortlist:

- Students from RMIT proposed empowering young people in both Australia and Vietnam through video communication technology to understand and advocate for the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building upon the power of narratives as tools for catalysing action, the project aims to encourage young people to expand their thinking to global possibilities, and to take on human-centred design.
- Students from the University of Sydney and BRAC University, Bangladesh sought to apply mobile application technology to address knowledge gaps regarding child and maternal nutrition in Bangladesh. The proposed app would disseminate essential dietary and nutrition information and advice to pregnant women, tailored for different stages of the pregnancy and personal health requirements.
- Students at the Queensland University of Technology and Kathmandu University collaborated to propose completing a research project to understand the knowledge levels of students in Nepal regarding the causes and impacts of climate change. Using the findings, they planned to develop targeted school curriculum proposals addressing climate change,
to be submitted to the national education authorities.

Winning ideas:

- **PNG Education Network for Disaster Risk Reduction**

  Murdoch University students will seek to address low knowledge levels of disaster risk reduction (DRR) strategies and systems in rural Papua New Guinea (PNG), by providing targeted training of existing and future teaching networks. They have identified that schoolchildren present as both particularly vulnerable in time of disaster, and also well-positioned to transmit DRR knowledge throughout communities. By educating teachers in DRR during their educational training, schoolchildren in rural areas will be receiving essential knowledge well into the future. The judges were impressed by the sustainability thinking behind this proposal, and agreed that DRR will be an ongoing and increasingly important challenge to address in PNG.

- **Investigation of affordable clean energy solutions for off-grid rural communities in the Philippines**

  Students from the University of Technology Sydney and the University of the Philippines will aim to bring renewable energy solutions to off-grid, energy-poor communities in the Philippines. Through a combination of community education, market research and fostering of social enterprise, the project seeks to ideate businesses which can provide clean and affordable renewable energy solution to households, replacing an existing reliance on kerosene. The vision for the project is to see local entrepreneurial leadership address local problems with user-focused technology solutions. The judges appreciated the focus of this project on integrating results from current market research with social enterprise-led solutions.

We would like to thank all the students who worked hard to produce these proposals for the Award, and commend the high quality of submissions. The RDI Network and the University of Sydney congratulate the winners and look forward
to reviewing the outcomes of these exciting co-designed projects.

Robyn Alders AO is an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney. Philippa Smales is the Network and Partnerships Manager of the Research for Development Impact (RDI) Network.

The Research for Development Impact Network and the University of Sydney, hosts of the RDI Conference, would like to acknowledge the generous donation of Associate Professor Robyn Alders AO in making these Awards possible. Dr Alders was awarded the 2017 Mitchell Humanitarian Award in February this year, in recognition of her contribution to regional and international development.

Disclosure

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This post is an edited transcript of the address given by Robyn Alders upon her acceptance of the inaugural Mitchell Humanitarian Award at the 2017 Australasian Aid Conference.

To begin, I would like to pay my respects to the First Australians, past and present, and thank them for their patience and persistence.

It’s important that I acknowledge my co-nominees for this award and their wonderful contributions over many, many years to making our world a better place. It’s right that each of you be acknowledged and applauded.

Of course, I can’t proceed without thanking Mr Harold Mitchell also for not giving up on us Australians. Thank you for your belief that we can do better, that we can be better, and that when we unite together to tackle injustice and inequity, we all become better human beings.

Thank you to Stephen Howes, the Development Policy Centre, and The Asia Foundation for bringing us together for this impressive conference and dinner.

I do need to acknowledge that I would not be standing before you without the support of my family and colleagues with whom I’ve been privileged to work over the years. I share this award with them.

And now, Stephen has told me that I’m meant to say something inspiring – to inspire you in this ‘post-truth’ world where celebrities have become a more trusted source of information than scientists. Thanks Stephen; here goes.
About a month ago, I was sitting having breakfast in Dili, reading an Aussie paper online. The headline that jumped out at me was that Pistol and Boo – and yes, I can see that some of you know who I’m talking about – yes, the news in a major daily newspaper was that Amber Heard was to retain custody of Pistol and Boo after her divorce from Johnny Depp.

So, what can I say in a world where I know the names of two dogs who fly around the world in a private jet, and where I can be in a country where one in two nameless children receive inadequate nutrition and so never reach their potential?

Fortunately our speakers today have helped me with this task:

From our Foreign Minister, who rightly mentioned that our commitment to international aid must be homegrown.

To Michael Woolcock, reminding us of the importance of actively seeking out subnational variation. Subnational variation, now there’s a great idea, as was his suggestion that we take a systems approach.

I’d like to believe that by taking a systems approach we can put a spotlight on the drivers of the increasing wealth gap within Australia and the startling gap between high- and low-income countries.

Of course, when I’d finished my PhD here at the ANU in early 1989 and headed off to work at the University of Zambia, I didn’t understand any of this. I did, unfortunately, think that I knew a lot and had a lot to share. What my Zambian colleagues so kindly taught me was that I did know a lot, but I knew a lot about very little. So my list of thank yous continues, as I’d also like to thank my Zambian colleagues for uneducating me.

After three years of learning in Zambia I briefly returned to Australia but couldn’t settle. In what my veterinary mentor described as a ‘career-ending move’, I left a university job in Australia to become a program officer for Community Aid Abroad
(CAA), now Oxfam Australia, and it was this position that started my enduring relationship with Mozambique. As many of you know, the official language in Mozambique is Portuguese with 16 major linguistic groups within the country. When I arrived there in May 1993, Mozambique was, according to the UNDP Human Development Index, the poorest country in the world and it was just emerging from 16 years of war.

Once again I extend my thanks to my Mozambican colleagues and friends for expanding my horizons to understand that the financially poor can be rich in so many other ways. Thanks for coping with my atrocious attempts at Portuguese, and thanks for believing that it was possible to teach me how to dance.

Let me offer you one little anecdote to give you a glimpse of how difficult it must have been for my wonderful Mozambican colleagues:

One Saturday morning Senhor Romao, who was one of the CAA drivers, arrived at the office (where we also lived out the back) to ask if he could borrow one of the Honda motorbikes. Sr Romao was an excellent driver and logistician, and I was happy to approve his request. He was also delighted that I’d accepted his request. It turns out that his request was that I give him the ‘honour’ of attending a birthday party for his daughter that afternoon. Yes, I’d heard ‘honra’ in Portuguese and thought ‘Honda’.

Well at least no one’s life depended on this misunderstanding. And it gets better: it was Saturday afternoon by the time another colleague helped me to understand what was going on, and I didn’t have a birthday present. So Olga kindly arranged for her step-sons to take me down to one of the shop owners that they knew to ask him to open up his shop so I could make the necessary purchase. This is typical of the kindness that people have extended to me during my wonderful two decades of living and working internationally.

Walking back from the shop, Olga’s step-son, a beautiful young man, who up to this point I thought spoke Portuguese only, turned to me and said, in perfect
English, “We both know that I am not what you need”. I looked at him and could only agree. For those of you closer to my vintage, you’ll know that he was quoting a line from a Tracy Chapman song. He just wanted to be able to say something to me and thought speaking a line from a song would be a good start. Well, at least, it did buoy my spirits briefly.

Anyway, to me, this brief example served to highlight three important things:

Firstly, that I really needed to study Portuguese;

Secondly, that people in the countries where I was working worried about my wellbeing and took very good care of me; and

Thirdly, that having BSc(Vet), BVSc, DipVetClinStud and PhD after my name didn’t really qualify me for working in international development.

So now, 25 years later, I understand that development takes time. It takes time in Australia as it does everywhere else.

In 2012 I returned to Australia as I’d learned something else. On the food and nutrition security front, I felt that we were never going to achieve great outcomes in low- to middle-income countries while high-income countries set less than optimal examples.

I reflected on our near neighbour Timor-Leste, where 50% of children are stunted and local farmers are struggling to compete against imported food products, and that just across the water 60% of Australians are overweight and farming families are facing extinction due to poor farm gate prices. I’d concluded that a systems approach was vital, and in this case a focus on sustainable food systems.

Let me hasten to say that my take-home message is not that you should stick around in Australia until we sort out our own problems, but simply that we all be honest when working internationally.

We are all still learning how to achieve sustainable human development. Australia
may be ranked No. 2 in the UNDP Human Development Index, but problems such as an unacceptably high prevalence of mental health issues, domestic violence, increasing numbers of households struggling to put good food on the table, and our ongoing inability to come to terms with our own history in relation to First Australians, are real and we need to address them.

Internalising and owning our own history helps us to better appreciate the history of other countries, to start to see things through their eyes. As an academic working internationally, I’ve learnt to study the history of research, to remember that it’s not my country and it’s not my data.

And for you, the up-and-coming thought leaders and doers: we need your fresh vision more than ever.

While climate change is magnifying issues such as food and water security, it also presents an unprecedented opportunity for all of us to focus on what is important:

To harness our amazing intellect and humanity to achieve sustainable and dignified life for all.

Thank you.

Robyn Alders AO is an Associate Professor at the University of Sydney. Read Robyn’s aid profile here, and profiles of the other nominees for the 2017 Mitchell Humanitarian Award here.

Nominations for the 2018 Aid Profiles, which will make up the shortlist for the 2018 Mitchell Humanitarian Award, are being accepted on a rolling basis. More information about the profiles and award can be found here.

Disclosure

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With the human population now at 7 billion and rising, agriculture and agricultural R&D has never been more important.

I’ve been privileged to be associated with international agricultural R&D in Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia for the past 20 years. While the need for agricultural production to keep pace with human population growth and increasing urbanisation is pressing, it is a process that does not cope well when rushed. The key components of successful programs can be brought down to four P’s:

- People
- Participation
- Partnership
- Persistence
Taking these components one by one ...

**People**

It’s critical that the team of people involved in the R&D have interests that intersect and contribute to the overall goal of the program.

It’s currently fashionable to speak of multi-disciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches and, in the case of agricultural R&D, it is essential. Ecologically sustainable agriculture is built on healthy systems. These include agricultural, ecological, cultural, and administrative systems which all need to function efficiently and effectively. Consequently, the composition of an R&D team should reflect this complexity by including value chain specialists, ecologists, anthropologists and gender specialists in addition to those more commonly recognised as traditional agricultural professionals (including farmers themselves).

Gender is regularly included in programs as a cross cutting issue, but it rarely receives in depth attention. Most agricultural programs focus on increasing yields or animal production and in most cases these ‘cash crop’ programs are considered ‘men’s business’. The burden that some countries are facing in relation to persistent malnutrition in significant portions of their populations alongside increasing numbers of obese citizens suggests cause for pause. Women’s agricultural work often coincides with the crops and animal products that are consumed at the household level using varieties and breeds that are considered ‘low output’. However, in terms of overall nutritional value and impact on the environment, these ‘low output’ farming systems often perform extremely well.

**Participation**

Achieving effective communication, dialogue and participation is always easier said than done. Often the need to produce results within increasingly short project cycles mean that agricultural R&D programs have to move forward at a
pace that does not always allow for the effective participation of stakeholders. To achieve significant impacts with sustainable adoption pathways, it is crucial that all key national (i.e. government and private sector agricultural services, in addition to national agricultural research organisations) and regional stakeholders (i.e. regional economic communities, in addition to multilateral agencies) are closely associated with the development and implementation of the project. The ability of research findings to contribute to positive impacts is facilitated by undertaking the research within the regulatory and administrative environment in which the findings are to be applied.

**Partnerships**

Agricultural R&D is a complex process and we learn together as we go along. Truly significant contributions have frequently been made because the work of a committed team, which involved long term partnerships, was able to flow over ten to 20 years. We really do need time to learn together and to share failures as well as successes.

**Persistence**

The saying “Rome wasn’t built in a day” is definitely applicable to agricultural R&D. Those who have grown up with agriculture understand the long term nature of the activity and the complexity of the systems involved. Solving real life problems, which all stakeholders agree is a priority, usually takes more than two or three years.

**An omission?**

Some of you may be worrying that this post is coming to an end and I’ve not mentioned funding for R&D. Of course we can’t do good R&D without resources and it’s critically important for donors, government and the private sector to invest in sound, long term agricultural R&D. However, in my experience, the R&D programs that have led to sustainable and positive changes have frequently been those with relatively low to moderate budgets. Having to think about the
best use of funds and identifying co-funding opportunities within existing frameworks is more likely to result in an output that is adapted to the financial and administrative system(s) in which it must continue to operate.

Comments?

I’d love to hear them ...

Dr Robyn Alders is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Veterinary Science at the University of Sydney. For more from Robyn take a look at the seminar she delivered at Devpolicy this year here (video here).

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