

# Focusing on what is important

by Robyn Alders

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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.

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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](#).*

### **Author/s:**

## **Robyn Alders**

Robyn Alders is a veterinarian and an Honorary Professor with the ANU Development Policy Centre, ANU Institute for Climate, Energy and Disaster Solutions and Veterinary Department of Infectious Disease and Global Health, Tufts University. She is also the Lead of the **OFFLU** Socio-Economic Working Group and Co-Chair of the Global Advisory Committee of the FAO-WOAH Peste des Petits Ruminants Global Eradication Programme.

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