

MEDIA RELEASE

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Australian volunteer inspiring a passion for science among Laos women

Coinciding with the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, Dr Kylie Ireland speaks about setting an example for gender diversity in science, technology and innovation in developing countries.



Dr Kylie Ireland's work in plant pathology has contributed to food security in Laos

Dr Kylie Ireland was always interested in science. She was first inspired by the fun lessons of her primary school teacher. "What kind of kid doesn't want the opportunity to get razorblades and cut things up to look at their insides?" Kylie asks.

Kylie has gone on to build a successful career in plant pathology and her passion for science is still strong. "Every day is a day of discovery" she explains.

"Science is relevant, and always will be. Simply using the scientific method and thinking about how you can actually make something better by testing scientific hypotheses or socio-political policies is incredibly powerful. Ultimately, what keeps me going is the power science has to make something better and impact the lives of others."

The Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program is an Australian Government initiative.

It was the possibility of interesting and important science that motivated Kylie to take part in an innovative team volunteering project with the Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program, focussing on food security in Laos. Kylie spent 18 months assisting plant pathologists from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry to address the threats associated with pests and diseases in food crops.

“Using applied research to improve management of plant diseases not only contributes to our knowledge of the world around us, but can protect our natural environments and biodiversity, and in the case of applying it in development settings, can improve livelihoods through increased yields, incomes and nutrition” says Kylie.

“There are some really strong female scientists in Laos, but there are very few plant pathologists” says Kylie, who mentored three young female trainees during her volunteer assignment. “I think that my biggest contribution was simply in acting as a role model, as a young female scientist with valid skill and knowledge to share, and in breaking down hierarchical barriers with the staff I worked with.”



Dr Kylie Ireland helped train young plant pathologists from the Laos Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry

“In the time that I worked with “my girls”, we really did break down barriers – they would joke, they would question and they also started running their own little scientific experiments in some cases – you just can’t put a value on that level of personal scientific enquiry!”

Kylie believes the future of women in science is bright and essential to international development. “Real scientific breakthrough and innovation has been shown to be most effectively achieved in diverse teams and work environments. Women add significantly to this diversity, and I think with the rise of more educated scientists from developing countries, their inputs and unique insights will push science even further.”

To date, nine Australian scientists have volunteered in the [food security project](#), working in collaboration with Laos’s Department of Agriculture and Forestry and the Crawford Fund, an Australian organisation supporting international agricultural research.

Kylie is now working as a postdoctoral research scientist with the CSIRO in Canberra. She spends her time working on the biological control of weeds, using plant pathogens, and modelling plant pest impacts and risk.

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International Day of Women and Girls in Science

The United Nations General Assembly designates 11 February as the International Day of Women and Girls in Science to champion the achievements of women and girls in science, raise public awareness of the importance of full and equal participation of women and girls in the sciences, and eliminate barriers to science education and employment for women and girls.

<http://www.un.org/en/events/women-and-girls-in-science-day/background.shtml>

Australian Volunteers for International Development (AVID) program

The AVID program is an Australian Government initiative providing opportunities for skilled Australians to contribute to the Australian aid program in 24 countries. Volunteers are placed with overseas organisations where they work with local colleagues to address development challenges.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) estimates that women make up just 28 per cent of scientific researchers worldwide.¹ In supporting the career development of women in science, the AVID program is helping to ensure that there are role models for girls considering education and careers in science across the Indo-Pacific region.

<http://www.dfat.gov.au/australianvolunteers>

About Scope Global

Scope Global is a specialist project management company delivering international development and international education programs and projects throughout Asia and the Pacific.

We consider ourselves as agents of change: helping people to positively change their world by facilitating international volunteer, study and professional development opportunities and assisting governments and communities to improve the lives of their citizens and members.

Scope Global is a delivery partner of the AVID program.

The report and video of the team volunteering initiative for food security in Laos with the Crawford Fund is available online at <http://www.scopeglobal.com/volunteers-for-food-security-in-laos/>

To arrange an interview with Dr Kylie Ireland, please contact:
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¹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics. 2015. Women in Science. <http://uis.unesco.org/en/topic/women-science> Accessed 30 Jan 2017.