

A DIVERSITY OF BENEFITS

Soft power and diplomacy

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Thank you to the Crawford Fund for inviting me to contribute to this conference today. It is a great opportunity. I have only recently concluded my term as Australia's ambassador to Vietnam, and Vietnam is a great case study of the benefits, the diverse benefits, that accrue from our contribution to their agricultural development – in fact, science-based contributions to their agricultural development.

My first diplomatic posting was to Vietnam from 1993 to 1995, so I have had the opportunity to see, with my own eyes, Vietnam's remarkable growth and development trajectory over a quarter of a century, and to get a real sense of the positive impact of Australia's support across many sectors, including agricultural development.

When I first arrived in Vietnam in 1993, the economic reform agenda 'Doi Moi' had been introduced only seven years earlier. The country was an emerging but still heavily socialist economy with 58% of people living in poverty and 50% in extreme poverty. By the time I returned as ambassador in 2019, Vietnam had improved the living standard of its people to a remarkable degree, reducing the poverty rate to just over 5% and extreme poverty to only 2%. It is now a truly market-oriented economy that is recognised as one of the success stories of the region and in fact is currently tracking towards 7.5% growth in 2022.

Australia sees our partnership with Vietnam through the broader lens of our engagement with the near region and in the context of our government's commitment to deepen engagement with South East Asia. Our engagement supports our ambitions for a strategic equilibrium in which no country is forced to choose sides and where all are free to make their own sovereign decisions. The priority we place on our relationship with Vietnam was clearly reflected in the early visit to the country by Foreign Minister Penny Wong in late June [2022], only weeks into the life of the new Albanese government. And as another indication of the importance of Australia's role in agricultural development, one of the very last functions I was privileged to host during my term as ambassador was for the ACIAR Commission, which visited only weeks before I left the country. That, to me, really sums up the priority we attach to supporting agricultural development in Vietnam.

Vietnam's economic prosperity and stability play directly into that of the Indo-Pacific, so Australia has an enduring and long-term interest in supporting the country's economic development as we work to stitch ourselves into the region's growth trajectory. Australia's support for agricultural development, agricultural research and, more recently, innovation in agriculture has made an important contribution to Vietnam's economic development story. This engagement is a great case study of the diverse benefits that can accrue from agriculture for development.

Fifty years of diplomatic relations and scientific interaction

The year 2023 marks 50 years of diplomatic relations between our two countries. Agricultural science was one of the first areas where we worked together in a development relationship. The government has invested in agricultural research for development from our DFAT aid program through the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) and most recently through the Aus4Innovation Program that CSIRO is leading.

ACIAR began its Vietnam program in 1993 with the aim of long-term improvements for smallholder farmers in Vietnam. It has made remarkable progress over the intervening decades and this is illustrated by the fact that, in 2017, ACIAR signed a new agreement with Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development for a ten-year strategy, which is ambitious and forward looking. It covers building scientific capacity, empowering smallholder farmers, enhancing human nutrition, strengthening agricultural supply chains, dealing with climate change impacts, and the list goes on.

CSIRO also has had a long collaboration with Vietnam, including government ministries, universities and research institutes and the private sector. It has a strong focus on applied science and innovation, and a further strong focus on the agriculture and food sectors. In 2018, building on its long-standing history of collaboration, CSIRO entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Vietnam's Ministry of Science and Technology to develop a more formal partnership between research and development institutions between Australia and Vietnam. In 2019 it entered into a further tripartite partnership with DFAT, CSIRO and the Vietnam Ministry of Science and Technology to co-invest and manage the four-year \$16.5 million development program for innovation which is aimed at supporting the inclusive and sustainable development of Vietnam's innovation system, with a strong focus on the agriculture sector.

The core value of our science-based partnerships in Vietnam is that they have and continue to directly target the country's development needs in line with our own overarching development strategy.

Changes in the fifty years

Over the years, our programs have changed and adapted in line with Vietnam's development and growth trajectory and its needs. They have moved from a predominantly donor–recipient relationship to a much more equal partnership, and from a strong poverty-alleviation focus in the 1990s to the innovation-based approach we now have with both ACIAR and CSIRO. Our collaboration and support have evolved to address emerging issues, and so they remain relevant, valuable and valued in the contemporary environment.

As one small example, in recent years ACIAR has been assisting in Vietnam's need to address the challenges posed by climate change and in particular its impact on the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in the Mekong Delta. For instance, the issue of rising sea levels leading to salinity intrusion that is affecting agricultural production is being dealt with by various research collaborations and projects, such as those under FOCUS [Farmer Options for Crops Under Saline conditions]. These projects will help farmers become more resilient, and thus

secure more income, through the introduction of new systems and the improvement of farming practices to meet market demands. Earlier this year, I was privileged to visit one of these projects at Can Tho University in the Mekong Delta, and I saw a simple user-friendly technique and how it can help farmers manage their crops better by tracking salinity in soil and matching their crops to that.

Like ACIAR's work, CSIRO's Aus4Innovation Program is focused on current and emerging issues in the agriculture and food sectors, with a view to supporting Vietnam's ambitions to reach high income status by 2045. It takes a diverse approach, including further promoting science commercialisation to deepen connections between the research field and the market. It also pilots innovation platforms to connect research to markets to solve challenges in the agriculture and food sectors with technology-based solutions. And it introduces innovation partnership models looking at novel solutions and technologies from Australia, which can be used in Vietnam to address challenges in the agriculture sector. CSIRO's work also supports policy development and dissemination, including in the development of the Vietnam National Strategy for Science, Technology and Innovation (2021–2030), and the dissemination of the National Artificial Intelligence Strategy, which is very important given the high potential application of this emerging technology to the agricultural sector.

A number of elements have contributed to the success of Australia's support for Vietnam's agricultural development.

- Our consistent long-term commitment to working with the Vietnamese Government through ACIAR and CSIRO programs has underlined Australia's role as a responsive and trustworthy partner throughout Vietnam's development history.
- Our engagement is based on our strong, long-standing partnerships and relationships.
- Our cooperation with partners under ACIAR is built on broad links across government, academia and science-based organisations, and these in turn have laid the basis for further collaboration through CSIRO in science and innovation.
- We have stayed the course. We didn't leave Vietnam once poverty-alleviation lost its priority, and we are now looking to the future, which is a valuable aspect of our cooperation.
- We work on a 'level playing field' with Vietnam. We treat them as partners and equals and we do genuinely collaborate.
- We are also very flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances, and that was illustrated strongly during the pandemic when many ACIAR and CSIRO programs were able to be adapted into an online format.
- And finally, our success is based heavily on our continuous ability to deliver tangible and meaningful programs that are suited to need and fit for purpose.

The power of people-to-people links

Our support for agriculture and scientific research has not been created with the sole focus of creating soft power, but it is a valuable aspect of what we get out of our programs. At the heart of this soft power are the close people-to-people links that emerge from partnerships

across a diverse range of sectors, through scholarships, research partnerships and collaboration, and people-to-people links in the field. The basis of these relationships is in the practical, tangible and relevant collaborations that Australia brings to the table, all of which I saw with my own eyes during my term in Vietnam.

In April this year in particular, one example that springs to mind is my visit to Điện Biên Province in the north-west, where I saw the ACIAR project ‘Intensification of beef cattle production to upland cropping systems in Northwest Vietnam’, which essentially is introducing much more efficient food and cropping systems to the local community. Importantly, the main beneficiaries of this program are the women ethnic minority farmers in the area. I met some of the beneficiaries and saw for myself how meaningful Australia’s contribution is, and the long-term benefits that will follow.

In summary, although soft power is not the core focus of what we, Australia, do in Vietnam with our agricultural support, it is a very meaningful benefit that does accrue. It builds a broader relationship with Vietnam which, as I described at the beginning, has broader interest for Australia in the region.

I was immensely proud to lead the ACIAR and CSIRO efforts in Vietnam, because I could see how directly they benefit the lives of people in that country.

Ms Mudie is a senior career officer with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and was most recently Australian Ambassador to Vietnam (2019–2022). She has previously served overseas as Australian High Commissioner to Sri Lanka and Maldives (2012–2016); Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations (Geneva); First Secretary, UN Permanent Mission, New York; and Second Secretary, Hanoi. In Canberra Ms Mudie was the inaugural Executive Director of the DFAT Diplomatic Academy (2016–2018) and has served as Assistant Secretary, Public Diplomacy Branch; Assistant Secretary, Information Resources Branch; and Director, Strategic Policy Section. Ms Mudie holds a Master of Southeast Asian Studies from the University of Hull; Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the University of Adelaide; and a Graduate Diploma (Foreign Affairs and Trade) from the Australian National University. Ms Mudie is a Vietnamese speaker who has studied Vietnamese at the RAAF School of Languages (1992), the Foreign Languages School, Hanoi (1993) and the Diplomatic Academy (2019).