

A diversity of benefits – Q&A

Ms Jessica E. Raneri, HE Robyn Mudie, Dr Jenny Gordon

Chair: Ken Young

Q: David Gale

I am here today in my capacity as a member of RAID. My question is for Robyn. I spent eighteen months at Can Tho University during my post-grad research and I was an Endeavour Scholarship recipient, so I have a sense of the soft diplomacy you are talking about. Thinking ahead, what do you think the next steps or the new approaches in this space are?

A: Robyn Mudie

Thanks very much for the question. Great to hear that you were at Can Tho. It was really inspiring to see that long-standing collaboration between Australia and Vietnam playing out in such a tangible way. I think the next steps in our science-based collaboration with Vietnam are the things that I mentioned that CSIRO is focusing on, and ACIAR as well, looking at high-tech agriculture and agricultural techniques.

Although not directly related to the agricultural focus, I did have the opportunity to go to Tram Chi National Park and to see CSIRO's work with artificial intelligence in monitoring and surveilling the wetlands and monitoring the patterns of migratory birds and water loss and other issues. The technology which is being embraced is an example of what Australia and Vietnam can do together and it has an adaptability into the agricultural sector.

One of the important things that we're doing with both ACIAR and CSIRO is looking at long-term sustainability of our engagement. The project that I mentioned in Điện Biên had strong support from the local government, and they were looking at taking on responsibility for the next phase of that project. That is where we should be aiming to put these activities into sustainable format for the future for Vietnam.

The science commercialisation I mentioned, which CSIRO is leading, is also very important, to make sure that all these tools of trade that we are giving them, and all the results of the collaboration, are going somewhere that will lead to sustainable results, connection to market and adaptability to the current circumstances. It's all about the future.

There is still a lot of work to be done in sustainable production for smallholder farmers, but the Vietnamese are very keen to partner with us. And I think that is where the soft power comes in, that we are seen to be partners for the future. We have been there in the past, we are here in the present, and we will be there for the long term – and that's really valuable.

Q: Helen Garnett, The Crawford Fund

You mentioned what was being done in Vietnam with regard to increasing salt and crops, and the tools. Last night in the Sir John Crawford Address we heard that salinity and issues like this are increasingly important in the Pacific Islands. I am always interested in how learnings in one country are being transferred across into implementation and sharing in other countries, and

so I am particularly interested in this case because I think the whole issue of increasing salt is really important. Vietnam is a very interesting country. Geographically it goes from the far north down to the south; it crosses a lot of temperature and agro-ecological zones. I would think there would be some learnings from that work to be shared, and I am keen to understand how that sharing is happening and who is doing it.

A: Robyn Mudie

I cannot answer in specifics because I haven't seen the detail of what ACIAR is doing, but I do know that our model of collaboration across many areas of agricultural development in Vietnam is one that ACIAR replicates across the region in many different countries, including in the Pacific. As I mentioned, that credibility and long-term engagement, and the ability to prove that what we have is useful for a particular country scenario and then to adapt it to the future and to adapt it to different challenges like salinity – that's where the 'value-add' really comes in, because we are a credible partner. We can approach a host government and talk to them about different challenges, and then take the results and show them the evidence of what we have achieved in other countries. I can't give you any specifics on whether the fantastic beetroot crops I saw at Can Tho University have been translated into the Pacific. But the essential idea was to take a new product, show the local population how to farm it, how to track the salinity, how to make it most productive, and how to build it into the market economy of that area. I would be surprised if we weren't taking that approach into other countries as well.

ACIAR is publishing an evaluation that looks at agricultural innovation platforms across a number of different examples, to try and draw out the lessons on what actually works, and then to embed them into future designs of programs. The challenge is, there are a lot of factors – such as the quality of leadership, the quality of the institutions that you are working with, etc. One challenge always is the sustainability of funding – being able to maintain resources to keep things going when the research part of the project finishes. Sometimes that means evolving from a research model to a different kind of model in terms of funding, which the development program at DFAT continues to look at.

There is a sense that you cannot just pluck one model that works somewhere and apply it somewhere else. It is not just that the R&D itself may be relevant in terms of the agro-ecology of the new place and the problem they are trying to solve; there is also their broader set of systems, and how you engage the decision makers. You need to build learning-based systems as well. The extent to which that learning is sustained and that other groups learn from those first groups is sometimes natural in an environment – and at other times you need to work very hard to create that flow. We are still learning a great deal about how to do this well.

Chair:

Sorry, we have run out of time. Please give another round of applause for our speakers.